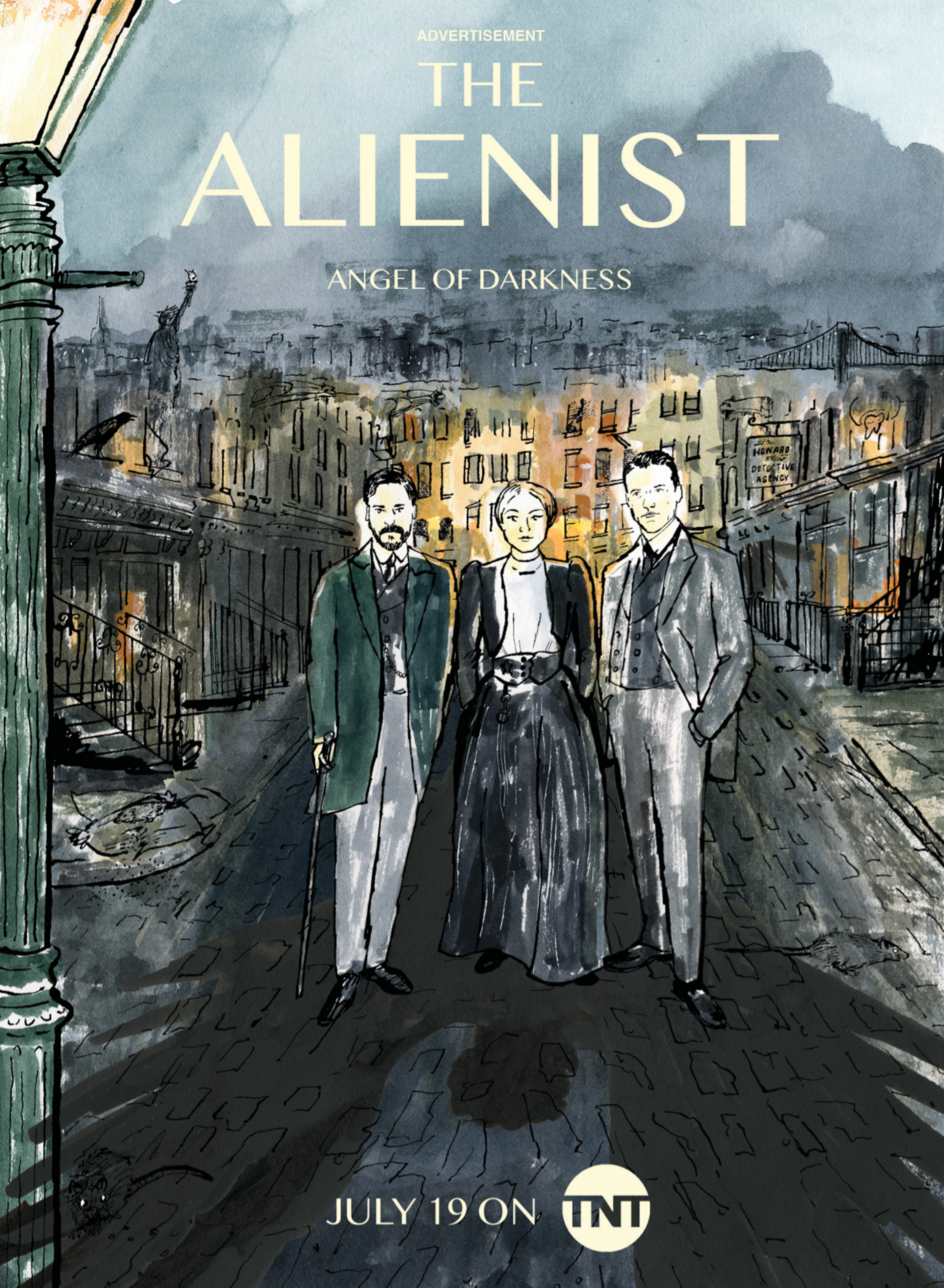


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“When I was diagnosed with prostate cancer, NYU Winthrop’s CyberKnife® was the answer to my prayers.”



Apostle Billy Richards
Grace Fellowship Ministries
Brooklyn, NY

Following a routine physical, Pastor Billy Richards of Grace Fellowship Ministries in Brooklyn was referred to a urologist for further testing where he learned the news that shocked him. He had prostate cancer. After much prayer and discussion with his family, Pastor Richards decided to hold off on treatment because he did not like the options he was given, especially surgery.

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NYU Winthrop is the only CyberKnife Center in both Manhattan and Long Island. For more information about CyberKnife, call 1-866-WINTHROP or visit nyuwinthrop.org. **To hear Pastor Billy’s story, go to nyuwinthrop.org/pastorbilly.**

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THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



NOVELLA

In her long-form fiction *"Many a Little Makes,"* Sarah Shun-lien Bynum explores friendship and class.



DISPATCH

Lauren Hilgers on how two waves of COVID-19 cases swept through the Texas Panhandle.

Download the New Yorker app for the latest news, commentary, criticism, and humor, plus this week's magazine and all issues back to 2008.

THE MAIL

COVERING MINNEAPOLIS

Reading Luke Mogelson's impeccably reported account of the Minneapolis protests following George Floyd's death was cathartic ("The Uprising," June 22nd). I'm a reporter for WCCO-TV, the CBS station in Minneapolis, and was there with Mogelson during many of the events that occurred in the Third and Fifth Precincts. His piece crystallized for me, a white man, the "fundamentally unknowable" fear that Black protesters have of law enforcement. I will always remember the officer in riot gear who sprinted toward my photographer and me, rifle pointed, screaming repeatedly, "Get the fuck back!" After we turned a corner in a frightened retreat, the officer pursued us down half a block, and I wondered why he couldn't treat us like human beings. Mogelson makes clear that what I felt in that moment was what some Black protesters say they feel every time they see an officer. Several people I met during my reporting told me that they wouldn't consider it a loss to abolish the police, because they've never felt protected or served by law enforcement in the first place.

David Schuman
Minneapolis, Minn.

MID-CENTURY MYTHS

Paul Elie's commentary on the extent to which Flannery O'Connor was racist suggests that Angela Alaimo O'Donnell, in her new study of the author and race, "backdates O'Connor as a writer of her time when she was a near-contemporary of writers typically seen as writers of our time" (A Critic at Large, June 22nd). As proof, Elie calls up five writers whose birth dates correspond to O'Connor's—Márquez, Angelou, Le Guin, Wolfe, and Walcott—implying, with some finger-wagging, that O'Connor, by comparison, was incapable of thinking outside of her time and place. But O'Connor died in 1964, at age thirty-nine, and the writers whom Elie cites all lived until the twenty-tens. We cannot know how O'Connor's ideas

might have evolved as she witnessed events—like the election of a Black President—that a white woman living in the rural South in the nineteen-fifties would not have perceived as possible. O'Connor died too soon.

Margaret Earley Whitt
Professor Emerita
Department of English
University of Denver
Denver, Colo.

AFTER THE RACE RIOTS

Jill Lepore, in her survey of U.S. commissions appointed to investigate race riots, says that they allow governments to "appear to be doing something" about racial injustice "while actually doing nothing" ("The Riot Report," June 22nd). This may be true, but for me, as a young white journalist covering civil-rights protests in the nineteen-sixties, the Johnson Administration's Kerner Commission made a profound and lasting impression, especially in its recommendation to improve newsroom diversity. In 1979, as the news editor of the Rapid City *Journal*, I hired Tim Giago, South Dakota's first Native American newsperson. He later left to start his own weekly, the *Lakota Times*, with his then wife, Doris, on the Pine Ridge reservation. Tim trained others who went on to found their own Native newspapers, and Doris became the first Indian journalism professor at South Dakota State University. In 1990, in response to Tim's proposal to rename Columbus Day, the state became the first to officially celebrate Native Americans' Day. In that part of the country, the Kerner Commission report is not a forgotten document—it was a pebble dropped in a still lake. The ripples are spreading today.

Jim Carrier
Burlington, Vt.

•
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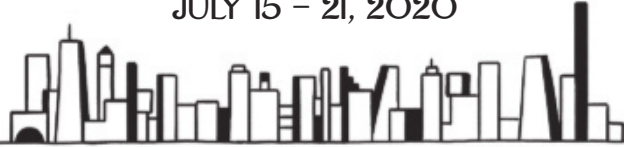
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In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, New York City museums, galleries, theatres, music venues, and cinemas have closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found online and streaming.

JULY 15 – 21, 2020



GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



With live dance performances mostly on pause, dancemakers have been pivoting to video in a hurry. This makes the **Dance on Camera** festival, now in its forty-eighth year, especially relevant. Streaming online July 17-20 (at dancefilms.org), it showcases short films, including Susan Misner's powerful and timely "Bend," and feature documentaries, such as Khadifa Wong's "Uprooted: The Journey of Jazz Dance" (above), which illuminates an often disrespected genre and a history as complex as that of race in America.

MUSIC

6lack: “6pc Hot”

R. & B. The singer-rapper 6lack often roots his minimal R. & B. in the sights and sounds of Atlanta, where he grew up. His new EP, “6pc Hot,” is a subtle ode to his city: its title is a nod to Atlanta chicken-wing joints, and its songs are dotted with memories of late-night drives, walks through his neighborhood, and visits to local spots. The specificity sharpens spare tracks about love and heartbreak that might have otherwise felt generic, and it reflects a sense of time as well as place. On “Outside,” 6lack sings about longing for connection amid the pandemic, capturing a quiet desire to be back in his community. The piano-driven melody is intimate and pretty, even in its restlessness.—*Julyssa Lopez*

“Infinite Now”

OPERA The Israeli-born, Boston-based composer Chaya Czernowin drew upon two disparate literary sources—Can Xue’s short story “Homecoming” and Luk Perceval’s play “Front,” partly based on Erich Maria Remarque’s “All Quiet on the Western Front”—to create her opera “Infinite Now.” A stark ritual for singers and actors set to music that proceeds inexorably from hush to maelstrom, the piece juxtaposes literal war with a battlefield of the mind to evoke personal struggle against a hopeless situation. It was widely acclaimed as one of the banner events of 2017, and now its premiere staging, directed by Perceval and filmed at the Flemish Opera, in Ghent, Belgium, streams for free on YouTube for the next six months, courtesy of Opera-Vision, a generous coöperative program that showcases productions from twenty-nine international companies.—*Steve Smith (July 17 at 1.)*

Khruangbin: “Mordechai”

EXPERIMENTAL FUNK The Houston trio Khruangbin is hard to place, and that’s part of its allure. The band gets its name from a Thai word that roughly translates to “flying engine,” and, at live shows, the bassist and the guitarist cultivate an air of mystery by hiding beneath heavy, fringed wigs. The music—composed of complex tangles that twist together retro funk, sixties Thai pop, Middle Eastern scales, and psychedelic soul—sounds as though it’s coming from everywhere all at once. But Khruangbin’s latest release, “Mordechai,” is looser, more lyrical, and more accessible than previous records; “Time (You and I)” could power a disco party for hours, and the sunny guitars of “So We Won’t Forget” stretch out like an endless summer day.—*J.L.*

Marcin Wasilewski Trio & Joe Lovano: “Arctic Riff”

JAZZ Marcin Wasilewski is a smart, lyrical pianist who can get heated—but never too heated—when the music demands it, and on “Arctic Riff” he leads a spruce, contained trio that has become a mainstay of the decorously modernist record label ECM. With the addition of the saxophonist Joe Lovano, a noted individualist who uncannily finds his place in seemingly any musical situation, the album’s ad-hoc quartet produces a seamless blend of inviting original songs, moody group impro-

visations, and two invigorating takes on Carla Bley’s evergreen “Vashkar.”—*Steve Futterman*

“To My Distant Love”

CLASSICAL On Site Opera, refusing to allow social-distancing guidelines to get in the way of its site-specific productions, lets each audience member choose the setting for a private performance of “To My Distant Love.” The baritone Mario Diaz-Moresco, accompanied by the pianist Spencer Myer, places a phone call to one ticket holder and sings the six songs of Beethoven’s “An die Ferne Geliebte,” a gentle expression of longing in a time of separation; the audience member, assuming the role of the beloved, can take the call from a couch, a sidewalk, or a perch at a misty window. The soprano Jennifer Zetlan and the pianist David Shimoni take over these one-on-one performances from July 30 to Aug. 16.—*Oussama Zahr (July 16–Aug. 23.)*

Rufus Wainwright: “Unfollow the Rules”

ROCK Nobody sings quite like Rufus Wainwright, who, in a single breath, channels ennui and high drama while somehow managing to sound vaguely pissed off. In the years that he was

stationed in New York, he often trained his talents on grandiose cosmopolitan fare, from opera to a re-creation of Judy Garland’s famed Carnegie Hall concert, from 1961. Wainwright is now in Los Angeles, and his new album, “Unfollow the Rules,” reflects those environs. The disk has a California swoon—the high culture to which it bows is not Puccini but Nilsson—and was hatched in some of the same studios as his 1998 debut. If the new LP lacks that record’s youthful crackle, it still burns, this time with a slyly feminine allegiance to such subjects as Joni Mitchell, Wainwright’s daughter, and a testy fashion-world habitant with “a solid-steel bob.” Not surprisingly, the singer with the aggravated tone empathizes with emotionally guarded characters. “In fact,” his fashionista confesses, “I’m actually rather nice.”—*Jay Ruttenberg*

Jessie Ware: “What’s Your Pleasure?”

POP The British vocalist Jessie Ware has been as much a presence on hip dance floors—thanks to remixes of her tracks by others—as on the U.K. charts. For her fourth album, “What’s Your Pleasure?,” the huskily soulful singer and her producer, James Ford, have fashioned a pastiche of classic disco that renders outside

CONTEMPORARY CLASSICAL



In the liner notes of **Mahan Esfahani’s** newest album, “Musique?,” the idiosyncratic harpsichord virtuoso references American critics who’ve complained that his concert programs lack an overarching concept and merely reflect whatever he feels like playing. “That, of course, is correct,” he writes, asserting the same about the present recording. But “Musique?,” devoted to works composed between 1960 and 2018, does make a statement: Esfahani—an Iranian-born, American-raised evangelist for an archaic keyboard closely linked with centuries-old European music—elevates composers who deviate from convention. In acoustic works by Toru Takemitsu, Henry Cowell, and Gavin Bryars, he demonstrates the deft touch and technical bravura familiar from his celebrated Baroque interpretations. But, in electro-acoustic pieces by Kaija Saariaho, Anahita Abbasi, and Luc Ferrari, Esfahani’s exuberant lines, rapier-sharp thrusts, and bombastic explosions abandon courtly decorum, revealing an instrument strange and new.—*Steve Smith*



When the Austrian painter **Maria Lassnig** was forty-nine, she was living in Paris, successful enough but feeling stifled by her mansplaining peers. It was 1968, and the art world's epicenter had long since shifted from Europe to the U.S.—“the country of strong women,” in Lassnig's words. For the next twelve years, she lived in New York City, thriving in obscurity. It's not that the artist had renounced her career but, rather, that American dealers had little interest in the daring approach to figuration she called “body awareness,” which relied on senses other than sight. Major acclaim came late to Lassnig, as it too often does for women artists of her generation; she died shortly after the opening of her first U.S. museum retrospective, in 2014, at the age of ninety-four, and her reputation has only grown since. The Petzel gallery's charming online-only presentation “Maria Lassnig: Ode to New York” (at petzel.com) feels less like an exhibition and more like a scrapbook, a peek into the artist's private reveries (a detail of a breezy watercolor, from 1979, is pictured here) in a city in which anonymity can be freedom.—*Andrea K. Scott*

help superfluous. The album's velvety hue and deliberate tempos accentuate its nostalgic feel, with insistent rhythm-guitar flurries and tangy strings that seem to come straight from the Chic fake book. But this isn't simply a mood record; it's also a pop record—one so packed with hooks that it can bury its best song, “Read My Lips,” deep in the track list.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

ART

“The Book of Ruth”

“Your people shall be my people, and your God my God” are the most famous words spoken by Ruth in the Old Testament. They announce her bond with her mother-in-law Naomi, before the two widows set out from Moab to Naomi's native Israel. The Book of Ruth's themes—of immigration and the welcoming of foreigners, and of women's autonomy—were becoming urgently relevant in 2015, when the New York-based artist Barbara Wolff embarked on a two-

year-long project to create the nine-inch-tall, eighteen-foot-long illuminated manuscript at the center of this exhibition, now online at the Morgan Library & Museum's Web site. (The piece was donated to the museum by the patron Joanna S. Rose in 2018.) Wolff's illumination, at once epic and intimate, is contextualized in the show by Christian versions of the text from the Morgan's collection, dating from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, which make Wolff's homages (and pointed departures) clear. A short film offers a view of the artist's use of gilding techniques and narrative illustration, interweaving her commentary with that of Biblical scholars and Near East archeologists to lend the ancient story fresh dimensions.—*Johanna Fateman* (themorgan.org)

Dorothea Lange

Lange began her influential thirty-year career as a photographer and social crusader doing field work with her husband, the economist Paul Taylor, producing reports that the government handed out to promote the New Deal—imag-

ine the Trump Administration hiring artists to expose the plight of the working poor. Language, including the handwritten notes that accompanied her pictures, was central to Lange's project. The exhibition “Dorothea Lange: Words & Pictures,” intelligently curated by Sarah Hermanson Meister at MOMA, gives equal respect to Lange's photographic prints (ninety-six) and her publications (seven, in handsome shadow boxes and vitrines). (Although the museum is temporarily closed, a selection of images and fifteen audio guides are available on MOMA's Web site.) Lange's best-known images are of indelible faces in hardscrabble places; an entire wall of the show is devoted to Florence Owens Thompson, the subject of Lange's famous “Migrant Mother,” taken in 1936. But Lange also had a humane eye for text, such as the hand-painted sign she encountered at a California gas station in 1938: “This is your country don't let the big men take it away from you.”—*Andrea K. Scott* (moma.org)

NYC Public Art Map and Guide

The New York City Parks Department bills itself as “the greatest outdoor public art museum in the United States.” Since open-air activities remain the safest choice during the pandemic, this summer might be a good time to explore some of the hundreds of art works scattered throughout the five boroughs—all noted on the NYC Public Art Map and Guide—from the beloved “Alice in Wonderland” statue, in Central Park, to murals and abstract sculptures. In 2018, a lunar landscape arrived in Long Island City: Nobuho Nagasawa's “Luminesce,” in which seven concrete domes represent the phases of the moon and double as seating on the peninsula lawn of Hunter's Point South Park, offering a stunning view of Manhattan from across the East River. Alison Saar's Harriet Tubman Memorial, which was dedicated in 2007, occupies a less picturesque location, at the intersection of St. Nicholas Avenue and Frederick Douglass Boulevard, in Harlem. The thirteen-foot-tall bronze-and-granite statue is the city's first public monument to a Black woman. This summer, its location feels especially apt: the N.Y.P.D.'s Twenty-eighth Precinct station looms behind Tubman, who is seen striding forward, as if leading the way for future public art works inspired by this moment of monumental reckoning.—*J.F.* (nycgovparks.org)

Alexis Rockman

The coronavirus pandemic, the American President, citizens brutalized by the police—there's no shortage of reasons to worry these days. But climate change continues to pose the most catastrophic threat to the world. Since the mid-nineteen-eighties, Rockman, a New York-based painter, has been sounding alarms through his virtuosically realist pictures, in which natural histories of the past confront dystopian futures. (Imagine a collaboration between Martin Johnson Heade, Jeff VanderMeer, and Greta Thunberg.) In “Lost at Sea,” a virtual exhibition of the artist's ambitious paintings on wood and his more intimate works on paper, on view at the Sperone Westwater gallery's Web site, speculative fictions and cautionary facts can seem interchangeable. An alligator's-eye view of a water-borne blaze details the explosion of the S.S. Sultana steamboat on the Mississippi River, in 1865, which still ranks as the worst maritime disaster in U.S. history. Whether he's limning a tentacle from ink and

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What is OPDIVO + YERVOY?

OPDIVO® is a prescription medicine used in combination with YERVOY® (ipilimumab) as a first treatment for adults with a type of advanced stage lung cancer (called non-small cell lung cancer) when your lung cancer has spread to other parts of your body (metastatic) **and** your tumors are positive for PD-L1, but do not have an abnormal EGFR or ALK gene.

It is not known if OPDIVO is safe and effective in children younger than 18 years of age.

Important Safety Information for OPDIVO + YERVOY

OPDIVO is a medicine that may treat certain cancers by working with your immune system. OPDIVO can cause your immune system to attack normal organs and tissues in any area of your body and can affect the way they work. These problems can sometimes become serious or life-threatening and can lead to death. These problems may happen anytime during treatment or even after your treatment has ended. Some of these problems may happen more often when OPDIVO is used in combination with YERVOY.

YERVOY can cause serious side effects in many parts of your body which can lead to death. These problems may happen anytime during treatment with YERVOY or after you have completed treatment.

Serious side effects may include:

- **Lung problems (pneumonitis).** Symptoms of pneumonitis may include: new or worsening cough; chest pain; and shortness of breath.
- **Intestinal problems (colitis) that can lead to tears or holes in your intestine.** Signs and symptoms of colitis may include: diarrhea (loose stools) or more bowel movements than usual; blood in your stools or dark, tarry, sticky stools; and severe stomach area (abdomen) pain or tenderness.
- **Liver problems (hepatitis).** Signs and symptoms of hepatitis may include: yellowing of your skin or the whites of your eyes; severe nausea or vomiting; pain on the right side of your stomach area (abdomen); drowsiness; dark urine (tea colored); bleeding or bruising more easily than normal; feeling less hungry than usual; and decreased energy.
- **Hormone gland problems (especially the thyroid, pituitary, adrenal glands, and pancreas).** Signs and symptoms that your hormone glands are not working properly may include: headaches that will not go away or unusual headaches; extreme tiredness; weight gain or weight loss; dizziness or fainting; changes in mood or behavior, such as decreased sex drive, irritability, or forgetfulness; hair loss; feeling cold; constipation; voice gets deeper; and excessive thirst or lots of urine.
- **Kidney problems, including nephritis and kidney failure.** Signs of kidney problems may include: decrease in the amount of urine; blood in your urine; swelling in your ankles; and loss of appetite.
- **Skin problems.** Signs of these problems may include: rash; itching; skin blistering; and ulcers in the mouth or other mucous membranes.
- **Inflammation of the brain (encephalitis).** Signs and symptoms of encephalitis may include: headache; fever; tiredness or weakness; confusion; memory problems; sleepiness; seeing or hearing things that are not really there (hallucinations); seizures; and stiff neck.
- **Problems in other organs.** Signs of these problems may include: changes in eyesight; severe or persistent muscle or joint pains; severe muscle weakness; and chest pain.

Additional serious side effects observed during a separate study of YERVOY alone include:

- **Nerve problems that can lead to paralysis.** Symptoms of nerve problems may include: unusual weakness of legs, arms, or face; and numbness or tingling in hands or feet.

- **Eye problems.** Symptoms may include: blurry vision, double vision, or other vision problems; and eye pain or redness.

Get medical help immediately if you develop any of these symptoms or they get worse. It may keep these problems from becoming more serious. Your healthcare team will check you for side effects during treatment and may treat you with corticosteroid or hormone replacement medicines. If you have a serious side effect, your healthcare team may also need to delay or completely stop your treatment.

OPDIVO and OPDIVO + YERVOY can cause serious side effects, including:

- **Severe infusion-related reactions.** Tell your doctor or nurse right away if you get these symptoms during an infusion: chills or shaking; itching or rash; flushing; difficulty breathing; dizziness; fever; and feeling like passing out.

Pregnancy and Nursing:

- Tell your healthcare provider if you are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. OPDIVO and YERVOY can harm your unborn baby. If you are a female who is able to become pregnant, your healthcare provider should do a pregnancy test before you start receiving OPDIVO. Females who are able to become pregnant should use an effective method of birth control during and for at least 5 months after the last dose. Talk to your healthcare provider about birth control methods that you can use during this time. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you become pregnant or think you are pregnant during treatment. You or your healthcare provider should contact Bristol Myers Squibb at 1-800-721-5072 as soon as you become aware of the pregnancy.
- Pregnancy Safety Surveillance Study: Females who become pregnant during treatment with YERVOY are encouraged to enroll in a Pregnancy Safety Surveillance Study. The purpose of this study is to collect information about the health of you and your baby. You or your healthcare provider can enroll in the Pregnancy Safety Surveillance Study by calling 1-844-593-7869.
- Before receiving treatment, tell your healthcare provider if you are breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed. It is not known if either treatment passes into your breast milk. Do not breastfeed during treatment and for 5 months after the last dose.

Tell your healthcare provider about:

- Your health problems or concerns if you: have immune system problems such as autoimmune disease, Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis, lupus, or sarcoidosis; have had an organ transplant; have lung or breathing problems; have liver problems; or have any other medical conditions.
- All the medicines you take, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements.

The most common side effects of OPDIVO, when used in combination with YERVOY, include: feeling tired; diarrhea; rash; itching; nausea; pain in muscles, bones, and joints, fever; cough; decreased appetite; vomiting; stomach-area (abdominal) pain; shortness of breath; upper respiratory tract infection; headache; low thyroid hormone levels (hypothyroidism); decreased weight; and dizziness.

These are not all the possible side effects. For more information, ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist. Call your doctor for medical advice about side effects. You are encouraged to report negative side effects of prescription drugs to the FDA. Visit www.fda.gov/medwatch or call 1-800-FDA-1088.

Please see Important Facts for OPDIVO and YERVOY, including Boxed WARNING for YERVOY regarding immune-mediated side effects, on the following page.

IMPORTANT FACTS

The information below does not take the place of talking with your healthcare professional. Only your healthcare professional knows the specifics of your condition and how OPDIVO® (nivolumab) in combination with YERVOY® (ipilimumab) may fit into your overall therapy. Talk to your healthcare professional if you have any questions about OPDIVO (pronounced op-DEE-voh) and YERVOY (pronounced yur-voi).

Rx ONLY

What is the most important information I should know about OPDIVO (nivolumab) and YERVOY (ipilimumab)?

OPDIVO and YERVOY are medicines that may treat certain cancers by working with your immune system. OPDIVO and YERVOY can cause your immune system to attack normal organs and tissues in any area of your body and can affect the way they work. These problems can sometimes become serious or life-threatening and can lead to death and may happen anytime during treatment or even after your treatment has ended. Some of these problems may happen more often when OPDIVO is used in combination with YERVOY. YERVOY can cause serious side effects in many parts of your body which can lead to death. These problems may happen anytime during treatment with YERVOY or after you have completed treatment.

Call or see your healthcare provider right away if you develop any symptoms of the following problems or these symptoms get worse. Do not try to treat symptoms yourself.

Lung problems (pneumonitis). Symptoms of pneumonitis may include:

- new or worsening cough
- chest pain
- shortness of breath

Intestinal problems (colitis) that can lead to tears or holes in your intestine. Signs and symptoms of colitis may include:

- diarrhea (loose stools) or more bowel movements than usual
- mucus or blood in your stools or dark, tarry, sticky stools
- stomach-area (abdomen) pain or tenderness
- you may or may not have fever

Liver problems (hepatitis) that can lead to liver failure. Signs and symptoms of hepatitis may include:

- yellowing of your skin or the whites of your eyes
- nausea or vomiting
- pain on the right side of your stomach area (abdomen)
- drowsiness
- dark urine (tea colored)
- bleeding or bruising more easily than normal
- feeling less hungry than usual
- decreased energy

Hormone gland problems (especially the thyroid, pituitary, and adrenal glands; and pancreas). Signs and symptoms that your hormone glands are not working properly may include:

- headaches that will not go away or unusual headaches
- extreme tiredness or unusual sluggishness
- weight gain or weight loss
- dizziness or fainting
- changes in mood or behavior, such as decreased sex drive, irritability, or forgetfulness
- hair loss
- feeling cold
- constipation
- voice gets deeper
- excessive thirst or lots of urine

Kidney problems, including nephritis and kidney failure. Signs of kidney problems may include:

- decrease in the amount of urine
- blood in your urine
- swelling in your ankles
- loss of appetite

Skin Problems. Signs of these problems may include:

- skin rash with or without itching
- itching
- skin blistering or peeling
- sores or ulcers in mouth or other mucous membranes

Inflammation of the brain (encephalitis). Signs and symptoms of encephalitis may include:

- headache
- fever
- tiredness or weakness
- confusion
- memory problems
- sleepiness
- seeing or hearing things that are not really there (hallucinations)
- seizures
- stiff neck

Problems in other organs. Signs of these problems may include:

- changes in eyesight
- severe or persistent muscle or joint pains
- severe muscle weakness
- chest pain

Additional serious side effects observed during a separate study of YERVOY (ipilimumab) alone include:

Nerve problems that can lead to paralysis. Symptoms of nerve problems may include:

- unusual weakness of legs, arms, or face
- numbness or tingling in hands or feet

Eye problems. Symptoms may include:

- blurry vision, double vision, or other vision problems
- eye pain or redness

Get medical help immediately if you develop any of these symptoms or they get worse. It may keep these problems from becoming more serious. Your healthcare team will check you for side effects during treatment and may treat you with corticosteroid or hormone replacement medicines. If you have a serious side effect, your healthcare team may also need to delay or completely stop your treatment with OPDIVO (nivolumab) and YERVOY.

What are OPDIVO and YERVOY?

OPDIVO and YERVOY are prescription medicines used to treat adults with a type of advanced stage lung cancer called non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC). OPDIVO may be used in combination with YERVOY as your first treatment for NSCLC:

- when your lung cancer has spread to other parts of your body (metastatic), and
- your tumors are positive for PD-L1, but do not have an abnormal EGFR or ALK gene.

It is not known if OPDIVO and YERVOY are safe and effective when used in children younger than 18 years of age.

What should I tell my healthcare provider before receiving OPDIVO and YERVOY?

Before you receive OPDIVO and YERVOY, tell your healthcare provider if you:

- have immune system problems (autoimmune disease) such as Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis, lupus, or sarcoidosis
- have had an organ transplant
- have lung or breathing problems
- have liver problems
- have any other medical conditions
- are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. OPDIVO and YERVOY can harm your unborn baby. **Females who are able to become pregnant:**

Your healthcare provider should do a pregnancy test before you start receiving OPDIVO and YERVOY.

- You should use an effective method of birth control during and for at least 5 months after the last dose. Talk to your healthcare provider about birth control methods that you can use during this time.

- Tell your healthcare provider right away if you become pregnant or think you are pregnant during treatment. You or your healthcare provider should contact Bristol Myers Squibb at 1-800-721-5072 as soon as you become aware of the pregnancy.

- **Pregnancy Safety Surveillance Study:** Females who become pregnant during treatment with YERVOY (ipilimumab) are encouraged to enroll in a Pregnancy Safety Surveillance Study. The purpose of this study is to collect information about the health of you and your baby. You or your healthcare provider can enroll in the Pregnancy Safety Surveillance Study by calling 1-844-593-7869.

- are breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed. It is not known if OPDIVO (nivolumab) or YERVOY passes into your breast milk. **Do not** breastfeed during treatment and for 5 months after the last dose.

Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements.

Know the medicines you take. Keep a list of them to show your healthcare providers and pharmacist when you get a new medicine.

What are the possible side effects of OPDIVO and YERVOY? OPDIVO and YERVOY can cause serious side effects, including:

- **See “What is the most important information I should know about OPDIVO and YERVOY?”**
- **Severe infusion reactions.** Tell your doctor or nurse right away if you get these symptoms during an infusion of OPDIVO or YERVOY:
 - chills or shaking
 - dizziness
 - itching or rash
 - fever
 - flushing
 - feeling like passing out
 - difficulty breathing

The most common side effects of OPDIVO when used in combination with YERVOY include:

- feeling tired
- vomiting
- diarrhea
- stomach-area (abdominal) pain
- rash
- shortness of breath
- itching
- upper respiratory tract infection
- nausea
- headache
- pain in muscles, bones, and joints
- low thyroid hormone levels (hypothyroidism)
- fever
- decreased weight
- cough
- dizziness
- decreased appetite

These are not all the possible side effects of OPDIVO and YERVOY. Call your doctor for medical advice about side effects. You may report side effects to FDA at 1-800-FDA-1088.

This is a brief summary of the most important information about OPDIVO and YERVOY. For more information, talk with your healthcare provider, call 1-855-673-4861, or go to www.OPDIVO.com.

Manufactured by:
Bristol-Myers Squibb Company
Princeton, New Jersey 08543 USA

 **Bristol Myers Squibb™**

watercolor or conjuring ominous clouds out of oil, it's clear—even online—that, for all of Rockman's eco-activist passion, he's really here for the paint.—*A.K.S. (speronewestwater.com)*

THE THEATRE

And So We Come Forth

Richard Nelson has been writing about the Apple family of Rhinebeck, New York, for ten years, which explains the cozy intimacy of his sixth and latest installment (available on YouTube through Aug. 26): the cycle's siblings—and the actors portraying them—interact with a familiarity that feels earned and is lovely to watch. Only now they're doing it on Zoom, like the rest of us. Yet titling this new show, which Nelson also directed, after a line from Dante's *Inferno* gives it a weighty, near-apocalyptic import that the Apples' low-key, banal conversations do not reflect. As usual in Nelson's plays, the characters trade stories and family reminiscences, this time read from e-mails they have received. As compelling as the actors are, these secondhand accounts lack urgency: it feels as if the Apples, holed up in their respective bubbles, have little to share about—and with—the world.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli*

DANCE

Fire Island Dance Festival

This year's festival will not include a spectacular sunset over the Great South Bay, nor the usual suite of dances on a stage near the water, nor the closing party at which a cross-section of the dance world mingles over drinks. Like so many other events this year, the festival has been adapted to a virtual form. It includes new works made for the occasion by Ayodele Casel (a tapper of unusual warmth and joy), Larry Keigwin, and others. There are also highlights from previous editions, including an excerpt of Kyle Abraham's "An Untitled Love," from last year. The event collects funds for Dancers Responding to AIDS, a most worthy cause. The festival begins on July 17, at 7 P.M.—*Marina Harss (dradance.org/fidance)*

Mark Morris Dance On! Video Vault

At the end of June, Morris put three of his early works—pieces that are otherwise as hard to find as they are delightful—online. Those three gems, with introductions by Morris, are available on his company's Web site through July 19. The following day, they're replaced by three more, from his glory days in Brussels. Rather than the oft-performed blockbusters of that era, these are rarer fare, including "Pas de Poisson," a musical joke involving fake fish and Mikhail Baryshnikov. The rarest is "Wonderland," a dance noir with a massive Schoenberg score and Baryshnikov as a character who could be a thief, a victim, or a cop.—*Brian Seibert (markmorrisdancegroup.org/dance-on-video-vault)*

Play BAC: Trisha Brown

On July 16, the Baryshnikov Arts Center kicks off a second installment of performance vid-

DOCUMENTARY THEATRE



The pandemic has put a spotlight on medical workers, who have had to act not only as healers but also as witnesses, storytellers, and Cassandras. On top of that, they're only human. Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen are documentary-theatre pioneers, having created acclaimed works based on interviews with wrongfully convicted death-row inmates ("The Exonerated"), Iraqi refugees in Jordan ("Aftermath"), and West Virginia miners ("Coal Country"). Their newest, **"The Line,"** is drawn from interviews with medical first responders during the COVID crisis and is performed virtually by a cast that includes Santino Fontana, Alison Pill, and Lorraine Toussaint, with original music by Aimee Mann. The play, commissioned by the Public Theatre, is available at publictheater.org through Aug. 4.—*Michael Schulman*

eos from its archive with Trisha Brown's "Opal Loop." Created in 1980 and recorded at the center in 2010, the dance is most famous for what might be called its set: a mutable cloud of water molecules. But the sometimes obscured choreography, with its own evanescent beauty, is just as beguiling. The complex patterns underlying its seeming amorphousness periodically shine clear, like sun through fog.—*B.S. (bacnyc.org/playbac)*

"Samhara Revisited"

Surupa Sen, the artistic director of the Indian classical-dance company Nrityagram, is not only an imaginative choreographer working within the East Indian Odissi dance tradition but also a researcher with deep interests in the dance forms of South Asia. Her company first collaborated with the dancers of the Chitrasena Dance Company, an ensemble from Sri Lanka specializing in Kandyan dance, in 2012. It was fascinating to see the contrast between the wider stances and folksy delivery of the Kandyan dancers, with their loping jumps and expansive movements, and the Nrityagram dancers' complex musicality and more sinuous use of the back. In 2018, the companies came together again, in the dramatic setting of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Temple of Dendur gallery, to perform "Samhara." The temple is Egyptian, the dancers are Indian and Sri Lankan, the city is New York—the combination was magical. A recording of that show will be broadcast on the museum's YouTube page on July 18, at 7:30 P.M.—*M.H. (youtube.com/user/metmuseum)*

MOVIES

Antoine and Antoinette

The director Jacques Becker builds this snappy and hearty comic melodrama, from 1947, out

of streetwise details, from the stress and the danger of factory work to the wiles of adulterers. The protagonists are a young married couple—Antoine (Roger Pigaut), an earnest technician, and Antoinette (Claire Mafféi), a spirited shop clerk—who live in a cramped walkup in a rough-and-tumble Paris neighborhood. As they struggle with daily needs and pleasures, they face the pressure of businessmen and bosses—including a Mephistophelian grocer (Noël Roquevert) who tries to buy Antoinette's affections even as he extorts sexual favors from an employee (Paulette Jan). Becker, whose camera ranges breezily from Métro-station ticket booths to romantic rooftops, is a sophisticate with a populist lilt: the clandestine affairs of working people have a ruddy vitality that contrasts with the merchant's cadaverous clutches. A boisterous subplot involving a lost lottery ticket tells an ironic tale of impossible dreams, but Becker's ecstatic, overwhelmingly intimate closeups of the couple burn away daily cares with the blinding heat of erotic passion. In French.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Film Forum's Virtual Cinema.)*

Decade of Fire

With this documentary's blend of autobiography, firsthand observation, and historical analysis, the directors Vivian Vázquez and Gretchen Hildebran dispel pervasive myths about the devastation of the South Bronx in the nineteen-sixties and seventies. Vázquez recalls her childhood there during the sixties, when the neighborhood was multicultural and thriving, and reveals the racist and classist decisions, public and private, that proved catastrophic for the community, including highway construction, redlining, mortgage policy, the closure of firehouses, the layoffs of fire marshals, and police neglect. When landlords hired local kids to torch buildings for the insurance money, journalists reported on the kids but not on the

instigators and profiteers, and officials hardly blinked. In the eighties, Vázquez returned to the neighborhood as an activist, mobilizing residents to restore buildings and persuading politicians to back the recovery. The movie's cautious optimism about community organization and neighborhood stakeholders also emphasizes the national urgency of diverse and informed local journalism. Released in 2018.—*R.B. (Streaming on Amazon, Google Play, and Apple TV.)*

The Exiles

For this miraculous independent film, made between 1958 and 1961, the director, Kent MacKenzie, worked with young Native Americans in the Bunker Hill neighborhood of Los Angeles to dramatize events from their lives. The story, following three characters through a night of urban loneliness and dissipation, has an epic span and a monumental intimacy that belie its mere seventy-two minutes. Yvonne (Yvonne Williams), who is pregnant, dreams of a better life for her child; her layabout boyfriend,

Homer (Homer Nish), leaves her at the movies while he goes gambling. Tommy (Tommy Reynolds), a playboy, drinks himself into trouble, likening his life to “doing time on the outside.” The minutely incremental action unfolds in richly textured black-and-white images teeming with nuances of the city’s turbulent night life and augmented by the characters’ poignant, confessional voice-overs. As much an impressionistic gallery of urban landscapes as a set of candid portraits, the film joins an ardent sense of place with the subtle flux of inner life.—*R.B. (Streaming from Milestone Films.)*

Monsoon Wedding

This drama by Mira Nair, from 2001, has been hailed as a feel-good spree, but it’s better than that—a barely stable compound of the wounding, the confusing, and the appealing. The action takes place in Delhi, where a pair of middle-class parents (Lillete Dubey and Naseeruddin Shah) work themselves into a froth over the nuptials of their daughter (Vasundhara Das). Her marriage is, of course, arranged;

for all the racket and buzz of the film’s modernity, it finds time to make the suggestion that from this archaic arrangement can spring an enduring love. The groom is flying in from Houston, Texas; another relative travels from Australia, and you brace yourself for the cultural collisions. The result is a comedy, but only just. India’s stressful poise between orthodoxy and innovation (listen for the clash of peacock calls and cell-phone ringtones) leads to a devastating family fracture that is only half healed by the celebrations at the end. In English and Hindi, sometimes within a single conversation.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 2/25/02.) (Streaming on iTunes, Google Play, and other services.)*

The Old Guard

The main virtues of this supernatural action drama, directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood and based on a comic-book series by Greg Rucka (who wrote the script) and Leandro Fernandez, are its clever premise and its core of earnest emotion. Four freelance warriors, headed by Andromache, a.k.a. Andy (Charlize Theron), are endowed with immortality: they never age, and their wounds, however grave, quickly and completely heal. (Along with its Homeric leader, the group includes veterans of the Crusades and the Napoleonic Wars.) A U.S. marine, Nile Freeman (KiKi Layne), who displays the same power when wounded in Afghanistan, is dragged unwillingly into the group. When the others are captured by a London pharmaceuticals mogul (Harry Melling), who wants to extract and market their distinctive trait, Nile takes it upon herself to rescue them. Prince-Bythewood invests the heroes’ solitude—the result of outliving all of their friends and family members—with keen melodramatic pathos, but it’s merely a grace note to a sluggishly paced plot, thinly imagined characters, and rote shoot-outs. With Chiwetel Ejiofor, as a mysteriously motivated secret agent.—*R.B. (Streaming on Netflix.)*

Top of the Heap

This furiously imaginative drama, from 1972, stars Christopher St. John—who also wrote, directed, and produced the film—as George Lattimer, a Black officer on the Washington, D.C., police force, whose long-awaited promotion is blocked by his white captain. George’s existence is riddled with conflict—he’s not getting along with his wife (Florence St. Peter) or his lover (Paula Kelly)—and the roots of his torment are the hatred that he faces from both Black and white citizens and the violence that he painfully confronts and brutally dispenses on the job. Yet George is dominated by his fantasies—he dreams of being an astronaut and walking on the moon, as seen in flamboyantly developed, giddily surrealistic sequences that intrude on the action and leave him even more frustrated and embittered. These brilliant Afro-futurist interpolations are joined by George’s other fantasies, including a grandly conceived metaphysical reunion with his late mother, all of which are haunted by the political spectres of the time. This is St. John’s only dramatic feature; it’s a uniquely daring and idiosyncratic masterwork.—*R.B. (Streaming on Tubi and Amazon Prime.)*

WHAT TO STREAM



Long unavailable though widely acclaimed, D. A. Pennebaker’s 1970 documentary, **“Original Cast Album: Company,”** is now streaming on the Criterion Channel; its enduring delights are crowned by the singular artistry of Elaine Stritch. Most of the movie takes place during a marathon audio-recording session presided over by the musical’s composer and lyricist, Stephen Sondheim, and the Columbia Records producer Thomas Z. Shepard. In the opening song (“Company”), Stritch’s impassioned expressions leap out from the large ensemble. She records her big number, “The Ladies Who Lunch,” at the end of the session, in the middle of the night; blasting through fatigue, she delivers it in a single furious take that nearly shreds the screen with its intensity. But Shepard deems the performance “flaccid” and asks her to return a few days later for a retake (which was released on the album). Pennebaker films Stritch’s first rendition, among the most celebrated outtakes in history, with a rapt devotion that’s as revealing of the limits of recording as it is of the thrills of live performance—and of the camera’s mediating creative power.—*Richard Brody*

For more reviews, visit
newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town



TABLES FOR TWO

Goldbelly

Before the pandemic, I had been slowly working my way through a list of New York restaurants so iconic that I was embarrassed to have never patronized them. High on the docket was Raoul's, a bistro and celebrity magnet in SoHo that opened in 1975 and is best known, foodwise, for its burger au poivre: a brisket-blend patty encrusted in lightly crushed peppercorns, topped with a wedge of triple-cream Saint André cheese and a handful of salad (watercress, sliced cornichons, and red onion, dressed in vinaigrette), sandwiched in a challah bun, and served with a velvety au-poivre sauce. For a long time, it was available only at the bar, and in extremely limited quantities—first come, first served, and then it was gone.

A couple of weeks ago, I finally ate the burger au poivre, but not at Raoul's and not even in New York. I ate it in New Hampshire, where my family spent the month of June. Raoul's is one of many restaurants in New York, and all over the country, that work with an online startup called Goldbelly to ship their food nationwide. I had used

Goldbelly to send gifts from Russ & Daughters (specifically, the “New York Brunch” package, which comes with Nova, bagels, cream cheese, babka, and a pound of coffee) to far-off friends. What would it be like, I wondered, to take a food tour of my own city from two hundred and fifty miles away?

The box from Raoul's contained four raw patties (frozen when sent, and defrosted but cold by the time they arrived), plus peppercorns, cheese, sauce, vinaigrette, and buns. All that was missing were the salad components, which I had no trouble finding at a grocery store, and fries, which we picked up from a local restaurant. The cooking instructions were as simple to follow as the end result was momentarily lavish. For dessert, we opened pints from Malai, a Southeast Asian-inspired ice-cream shop in Cobble Hill, which dry ice had kept so deep-frozen in transit that they were painful to handle for more than a few seconds. A set of four seasonal flavors included buttery star anise and spiced peanut crunch, the latter featuring *chikki* (a brittle made with ghee and jaggery) and a gentle dose of cayenne.

Another night, I learned how easy it is to steam pastrami—from Pastrami Queen, on the Upper East Side—in the oven, using a little water and a lot of tinfoil. We got two lunches out of the “Choose Your Own Soup & Pierogi Pack” from the beloved East Village diner Veselka: its unmistakable Ukrainian borscht and mushroom-barley soup, warmed on the stove, and potato pierogi,

boiled to order. We made an afternoon ritual of Mexican-style popsicles—a dozen to a box, a pallet of *paletas*—from the pushcart turned Greenwich Village shop La Newyorkina, passion fruit and *arroz con leche* dripping down our chins. And we paired our nightly episode of television with slices of cream-cheese-frosted carrot cake from Lloyd's, a Bronx bakery that's famous for it.

The whole exercise was mostly delightful, if expensive and, considering the carbon footprint of the shipping, environmentally irresponsible. It also made me extremely wistful. Without a room full of fellow-diners bearing witness, without a professionally made Martini to accompany it, had I eaten a Raoul's burger at all? Is a restaurant still a restaurant when you divorce its food from time and space? I had considered ordering a pack of pizzas from Joe's in Greenwich Village, my preferred slice shop. But the small print on the Goldbelly listing explained that the pies were shipped not from New York but from Ann Arbor, Michigan, where Joe's opened an outpost last year, and I couldn't bring myself to add the pies to my cart. What I love about the original location, as much as the pizza itself, is that it's on my path from the West Fourth Street subway station to Film Forum. It's the perfect place to stand and inhale a slice before slipping into the cool darkness of a movie theatre, surrounded by strangers, alone but never lonely. (*Goldbelly offerings \$10–\$249.*)

—Hannah Goldfield

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT BARR'S OVERREACH

The cause of criminal-justice reform has been, in recent years, a welcome exception to the extreme polarization that has afflicted so much of our politics. Since 2008, the prison population has dropped in most parts of the country, in both red states and blue. It's gone down sixteen per cent in Louisiana and twenty-two per cent in South Carolina, which is roughly similar to reductions in more liberal places, such as California (twenty-six per cent) and New York (twenty-one per cent). The fight against mass incarceration even engendered a brief moment of bipartisanship in Washington, in 2018, when Congress overwhelmingly passed, and President Trump signed, the First Step Act, which made modest improvements in federal sentencing practices.

But this progress, at least at the federal level, has come to a halt. In the weeks since protests erupted around the nation following the murder of George Floyd, in Minneapolis, on May 25th, the President has returned to the "law and order" bluster that characterized his 2016 campaign. More to the point, the Justice Department, under Attorney General William Barr, has engaged in precisely the kinds of excesses that the reform movement has endeavored to correct. Most of the protests were peaceful, of course, but there was some violence and destruction of property. These sorts of crimes have traditionally belonged in the bailiwick of state prosecutors, who handle most violent crime in the United States.

Yet Barr's prosecutors have stepped in and charged at least seventy people with crimes in connection with the protests. In Mobile, Alabama, a protester allegedly used a bat to break a window of a police cruiser. Such an act is a paradigmatic state crime—an assault—but federal prosecutors contrived to bring a case for "civil disorder," drawing on a rarely used federal law. Bringing the case in federal court allows Barr to posture against the protesters and, even more important, to make them eligible for longer prison sentences, as is usually the case in federal prosecutions.

The most egregious example of this kind of federal excess is taking place in New York, where prosecutors in Brooklyn may be on the verge of responding to a crime with an injustice. On May 29th, two well-regarded lawyers, Colinford Mattis and Urooj Rahman, partic-

ipated in protests in Fort Greene. According to the complaint filed in federal court, just after midnight, Rahman stepped out of a minivan driven by Mattis and flung a Molotov cocktail through a broken window of an unoccupied police car. (In another part of Brooklyn, Samantha Shader, a twenty-seven-year-old woman from upstate New York, was charged in a separate Molotov-cocktail attack on a police van; neither attack caused any injuries.)

The two lawyers are both in their early thirties. Mattis is a graduate of Princeton and of New York University's law school, and he worked until recently at a well-known corporate law firm in Manhattan. He is active in community affairs in Brooklyn, and is responsible for the care of several young family members. Rahman, a graduate of Fordham University's college and law school, worked at Bronx Legal Services. Neither had a criminal record. (Shader did have a record of various arrests in different parts of the country.) Mattis and Rahman have pleaded not guilty, but the case against them appears strong. According to prosecutors, there is video evidence of Rahman throwing the improvised bomb, and police found the ingredients to make Molotov cocktails in Mattis's van.

In bringing the case against them, though, the Justice Department has engaged in grotesque overreach. If convicted of the charges in the indictment, Mattis and Rahman face a minimum of forty-five years and a maximum of life in prison. (If they were prosecuted in state court, as they should be, they would likely face five years or less.) The case



demonstrates the perversity of mandatory-minimum sentences, which remain common in federal court, despite the changes wrought by the First Step Act. The problems with mandatory minimums only begin with the simple fact that they keep people in prison for too many years. They also concentrate power in the hands of prosecutors and remove discretion from judges, who usually have a broader perspective on the appropriate levels of punishment. Moreover, mandatory minimums warp the entire judicial system, by putting unbearable pressure on defendants (and their lawyers) to enter guilty pleas and avoid the risk posed by a trial. (Prosecutors often waive the minimums if defendants offer to plead guilty.)

The case of Mattis and Rahman illustrates this point clearly. Faced with the certainty of decades of prison time if convicted by a jury, what defendant wouldn't try to cut a deal for a lesser

sentence? In federal court today, a remarkable ninety-seven per cent of defendants plead guilty rather than go to trial. But a system in which practically no one goes to trial gives government prosecutors far too much power. Judges and juries are supposed to operate as a check on prosecutors, and they can't do that job if nearly every defendant pleads guilty. Too often, prosecutors, like those in the case of Mattis and Rahman, use indictments to extort guilty pleas rather than to achieve justice.

This is, in many respects, a hopeful moment for progress in the criminal-justice system. District attorneys in cities like Philadelphia, Milwaukee, and San Francisco are pulling back from the mindless pursuit of more convictions and longer sentences. Eric Gonzalez, the Brooklyn District Attorney, is also a reformer, which may be a reason that Barr's minions snatched the Molotov-cocktail cases away from him. The Attorney General

has expressed nothing but contempt for more civilized approaches to law enforcement. In a speech in February, he attacked the new generation of prosecutors, asserting, "These D.A.s think they are helping people, but they end up hurting them. These policies actually lead to greater criminality." This, to put it charitably, is unproven. Reformers have been winning elections around the country not because their constituents want "greater criminality" but because they recognize that we have incarcerated too many people (and particularly too many people of color) for too long.

As usual, Barr is channelling his boss, who has responded to the George Floyd protests with ugly spasms of race-baiting and bigotry. But, as bad as Trump's invective is on Twitter and elsewhere, Barr's actions are worse, because individuals and communities will be paying the costs for years, or decades, to come.

—Jeffrey Toobin

ON THE HUSTINGS RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME



One night in 1984, when Heath Eiden was sixteen, he found himself at the Hotel Meridien in San Francisco, in the campaign suite of Walter Mondale. This was during the Democratic National Convention. Consultants and congressmen milled around, wreathed in cigar smoke. Eiden, then a high-school junior from Minneapolis, was there with Mondale's son Ted, as a volunteer. He was next to Mondale when the candidate took a call from Lane Kirkland, the head of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. ("You got it, Fritz"), and then announced to the room that he'd won enough delegates to secure the nomination. Eiden was bewitched. "The spirit left the room and jumped up into me," he recalled. "Fritz Mondale, the last honest politician: he actually said, 'Yeah, I'm going to raise your taxes.'"

After Reagan beat Mondale that year in a landslide (Mondale won just one state: Minnesota), Eiden, an early adept with his school's Sony camcorder, got the first on-camera interview with the

loser. (It led to his short film, "Triumph Over Tragedy: The Humphrey-Mondale Tradition," which is archived at the Minnesota Historical Society.) Eiden had TV-news aspirations, but before long disillusionment over sensationalism and dishonesty in the media soured him on it all. His last-ditch attempt was a documentary, in 2004, of another doomed White House bid, called "Dean and Me: Lessons from an American Primary," which failed to change the world or to make him rich.

A couple of weeks ago, Eiden, who now lives in Stowe, Vermont, and works as a video producer, got a call from Stuart Stevens, the political consultant, who also has a house in Stowe. Stevens has advised five Republican Presidential candidates, including George W. Bush and Mitt Romney, but has recently abandoned the Party, in the belief that it has abandoned him. (His eighth book, to be published next month, is called "It Was All a Lie: How the Republican Party Became Donald Trump." Last week, he said, "The Party always had a dark side. We thought it was a recessive gene, but it turned out to be the dominant gene. I feel like a sucker.")

Stevens was calling on behalf of the Lincoln Project, the confederation of G.O.P. apostates who, appalled by Trump,

had formed a political-action committee to defeat him. The Lincoln Project had been producing sharply negative TV ads about Trump, which have run mostly in Washington, D.C., mainly to needle their subject, but which, because of their sass and their source, almost always go viral on social media.

Stevens wanted Eiden to shoot the Lincoln Project's new spot. This one would feature an emergency-room doctor down the road, in South Burlington, named Dan Barkhuff, a former Navy SEAL and a graduate of the Naval Academy and of Harvard Medical School, who had started an organization called Veterans for Responsible Leadership. The occasion was the news that the President had ignored intelligence reports that a Russian military unit had been paying bounties to the Taliban for the killing of American soldiers in Afghanistan.

Eiden was torn. On the one hand, work was scarce during the pandemic, and, of course, he abhorred Trump and had been frustrated by the Democrats' failure to hit back. But, as a dyed-in-the-down Minnesota liberal, he had misgivings about working with what he called "the dark side"—some of the Republican operatives who, by way of rough tactics, had engineered the demise of so many of his favored candidates through

the years. Ultimately, though, the enemy-of-my-enemy principle pertained.

The previous week, he'd driven to Minneapolis with his teen-age son, to pay their respects (and shoot some footage) at the memorial for George Floyd. That experience, plus a few days in the suburbs among COVID truthers, and an encounter with a waiter making an "I can't breathe" joke, had only quickened his revulsion. "If it takes working with Republicans to get this fucker out of the White House, fine," he said.

"What kind of style do you want?" Eiden asked Stevens.

"Think Swift Boat," Stevens replied.

"I knew exactly what I'd found myself in the middle of," Eiden recalled.

Eiden and Barkhuff met up at Stevens's house. The Lincoln Project had sent a script, by a screenwriter of the HBO series "Band of Brothers," but Barkhuff ditched it for one of his own. Identifying himself as "a pro-life gun-owning combat veteran," he said into the camera, "Any Commander-in-Chief with a spine would be stomping the shit out of some Russians right now, diplomatically, economically, or, if necessary, with the sort of asymmetric warfare they're using to send our kids home in body bags. Mr. Trump, you're either a coward who can't stand up to an ex-K.G.B. goon or you're complicit. Which is it?"

Afterward, Eiden went home and uploaded the footage. An editor named Joey, in Denver, put it together overnight. The following afternoon, Stevens noted that the spot, called "Betrayed," had been viewed online more than six million times. To what end, time will tell.

—Nick Paumgarten

DEPT. OF POLICING ON DUTY



Officers of high rank in the N.Y.P.D. wear white shirts, and Deputy Inspector Keiyon Ramsey looks good in his. He is forty-three years old (young for such an eminent position), broad-shouldered, and more than six feet tall. Almost every day of his life has been spent in the Bronx, where he was born,



"Can't I just stay here with you and Mom? I don't like what I've seen of the real world."

grew up, went to college, and now serves as the head of policing in Police Service Area 8, which consists of twelve public-housing projects with more than twenty thousand residents. He speaks quietly and listens, and people do as he says.

When Ramsey was a child, his grandmother, who raised him, told him that a Black household must never call the police. As a young person, he did not like the police. In his early twenties, he got arrested for spray-painting the name of his rap group on a school sidewalk. He rapped under the names K-Black and Keiyon, worked as a security guard and as an Access-A-Ride bus driver, and went so far as to become a traffic agent. Traffic agents are part of the N.Y.P.D., but they don't carry guns or make arrests. One night, Ramsey was writing tickets when a cop car came by, driving slowly. He waved at the cops, and the driver, a white officer, answered with the familiar one-finger gesture. Ramsey's partner at the time, a young Black traffic agent named Eric Murray,

told him, "Don't let yourself be depressed about that. You can *change* that."

This advice struck him, so he took the police exam, passed it, and entered the academy. In 2005, he graduated in the top three per cent of his class. As a patrolman, an officer in the school-safety division, a transit cop, and a plainclothes officer on the street, he rose through the ranks to captain. He became commanding officer of P.S.A. 8 in October, 2018.

The following January, a rookie officer among the approximately two hundred police and civilians working under him died in a car crash on the way home from a shift. Ramsey went to the hospital, consoled the family, and cried with them. Then a shooting involving eight people, six firearms, and dozens of shots fired happened in his district. He called for more plainclothes officers and stopped the violence from escalating. In September, one of the plainclothes officers was shot and killed. Ramsey found himself back at the hospital, in the same room, grieving for another stricken

family. In March, COVID hit. Ramsey had ten sick officers under his command, then thirty, then more than fifty. None of his officers or staff died, but the department was losing as many as three officers a day. For each victim, an e-mail, accompanied by a photo, was sent out. One day, Ramsey checked his e-mail and saw Eric Murray's photo. Like him, Murray had become a cop, and the two had stayed friends. "When I saw his picture, I collapsed at my desk and cried," Ramsey said. "I never had a chance to thank him. I made deputy inspector not long after he passed."

After a moment, Ramsey went on, "We're a tight community. In the police department we love and take care of each other. The COVID deaths hit hard. We were just getting back on our feet when George Floyd was murdered, and the protests started. I totally, totally get the anger. I told my officers who signed up for duty at the protests that at one time the police were the slave-catching patrols, and I talked about the history of police violence against Black and brown people. I went all over again why people are so angry. That night, my officers are on duty near City Hall and one of my lieutenants gets hit in the neck with a rock and goes down, and another guy gets a gash in his arm that needs seven stitches. Later, my officers said to me, 'You said they were mad, but you didn't say they were gonna hurt us.'

"This department has changed," Ramsey continued. "It has adjusted. Eric was right—we can change it. There's less stop-question-and-frisk. We do po-



Deputy Inspector Keiyon Ramsey

licing better. Last night, 3 A.M., I got a call about a disturbance at the intersection of Claremont Parkway and Webster Avenue. I drove over there. At least a thousand folks were partying, drinking, listening to music, right in the street. Traffic was stopped in both directions. I had eight of my cops with me. We went through the crowd telling people we understand they got no place else to go, with everything closed in the pandemic, but they can't be here. They knew they were in our house. People understand when they're doing wrong. They dispersed. We would've stayed there all night if we had to, flashers going. The best thing on your side, if you're the police, is time, and you've always got time."

—Ian Frazier

HOUSEBOUND SOUND JARVIS COCKER EVOLVES



Like human artistic expression itself, "Beyond the Pale," the new album from the British pop musician Jarvis Cocker—formerly of Pulp, currently of a group called Jarv Is—has origins in a cave. "I'm a bit obsessed with caves," Cocker said in February, in Manhattan. Cocker, who grew up in Sheffield, in the North of England, is tall and thin, with glasses. He speaks in a gentle baritone, with a Northern accent, in tones of mild amusement. On a walk through SoHo, he wore an alpaca coat with a frisson of "Clan of the Cave Bear" chic. "This is actually what they make Steiff Teddy bears out of," he said, extending a sleeve. Two songs on "Beyond the Pale" arose from a Jarv Is performance in a cave and concert venue called Peak Cavern, in Derbyshire, U.K.; a new video features Jarv Is back in the cave, in early July, with a socially distanced band and no audience. As strobe lights illuminate the craggy walls, Cocker dances, with characteristic arm-intensive vamping. "Must I evolve?" he sings. "Yes, yes, yes," the band responds.

In the nineties, after having performed with Pulp for more than a decade, Cocker became a Britpop icon, owing in part to

the band's song "Common People," the rare hit single about being on the receiving end of sexual slumming in art school. ("She came from Greece, she had a thirst for knowledge. . . .") More recently, Cocker has contributed to Wes Anderson movies, collaborated with Chilly Gonzales on a concept album about Chateau Marmont, edited books for Faber, and hosted BBC radio shows. Last year, after the Conservative election rout, his 2006 single "Running the World," a catchy, vulgar eff-you to politicians and the free market, nearly topped the U.K. singles chart. "I was quite touched by that," he said. On the new Jarv Is album, out this week but recorded pre-COVID, Cocker ponders maturity ("Your children are here to tell you / Do something new / Or do something else"); and, in "House Music All Night Long," singing of being "adrift in a world of interiors" and of "one nation under a roof," he seems to anticipate self-quarantine. "Goddamn this claustrophobia / 'cuz I should be disrobin' ya," he sings.

In SoHo, Cocker searched for his destination. "I think it's above a pizza place," he said. "Ah!" He was buzzed into the Dream House, La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's venerable light-and-sound installation, in a third-floor walkup space, which he first visited years ago, with Pulp. He climbed the stairs and headed toward a loud hum. "It stays with you," he said. "And it led me to explore and appreciate minimalist music, and get a lot from it. You get into sound as something in itself—the physicality of the sound." An attendant collected ten dollars and asked Cocker to remove his shoes, which he did. "No holes in the socks," he said, looking pleased, and went in.

The space was dark, buzzing with an electronic droning that sounded like an emergency-alert signal crossed with a dial tone. Cocker walked down a dim hallway into the cavelike main room, where an ancient-Mayan-looking head was projected onto the wall in magenta light. The room smelled of incense; pillows dotted the floor. Cocker sat, extending a leg. "If you move your head slightly, the sound changes," he said. "When you interact with it, it becomes very playful." He sat, listening. "I imagine this would be a good place to come and do meditation," he said. "I like the

idea of trying to still your mind.” Dancing can still the mind, too: “Dancing, you will feel self-conscious when you first start trying to do it. But, if you persevere, you react in time to the music, and your brain switches off.” With Jarvis Is, he embraces a similar in-the-zone-spontaneity; the basic arrangements came from live performances, he said, because “everybody gets too self-conscious when they go in the studio.” Not so in the cavern.

Cocker’s interest in caves intensified about a decade ago. “I was trying to entertain my son one weekend, up north,” he said. “We went to Creswell Crags, a Paleolithic settlement. There’s a carving of a horse’s head, and some of the only cave art in the U.K. It moved me, the thought of somebody back in the mists of time carving something on the wall.” In the gift shop, he bought



Jarvis Cocker

a book called “The Mind in the Cave.” “I started to think of a relationship as the story of evolution of life on earth,” he said. On the album, Cocker’s narrative point of view encompasses all of human history; its themes include extinction, evolution, fighting the power, saving the whale, temptation, gentrification, pharaohs, and lust. “Must I Evolve?” starts out sparsely, gaining speed and instrumentation as Cocker sings about the big bang, cells, and primordial soup; it becomes hypnotically danceable, as if gathering ecstatic resolve, around the discovery of fire. “It hasn’t really got a dénouement, which is kind of good,” he said. “Evolution never stops, does it?”

—Sarah Larson

BRAVE NEW WORLD SAFE TRAVELS



Road trips require rest stops; commercial air travel mandates queueing up for the T.S.A. Is there a better way to get out of town during a pandemic? According to a regional air carrier called JSX, there is. It has two dozen planes (maximum capacity: thirty passengers) that fly between private terminals and dedicated hangars. The flights cost about the same as their commercial counterparts, but, Alex Wilcox, JSX’s C.E.O., said, “we fall just underneath the line at which you become required to use a terminal and suffer all the indignities that commercial air travel subjects us to these days.” In Los Angeles, JSX operates out of its own hangar at the Hollywood Burbank Airport—it’s like Teterboro without the limousines. “At least we’re not at LAX,” a passenger named Alisha Wanninger said the other day, as she waited for JSX’s 9:30 A.M. flight to Las Vegas. She and her boyfriend had a layover there before continuing on to Phoenix to celebrate her birthday. The plan, she said, was to “drink some wine, lay out—super low-key.” She added, “We don’t want to be around too many people.”

Because JSX is not a commercial airline, it doesn’t need to screen its passengers at T.S.A. checkpoints. It runs background checks at the time of booking. A.I.-enabled thermal sensors take travellers’ temperatures and trigger an alarm if they register more than 100.4 degrees. I.D.s? Scanned from a distance. Boarding passes? Surfaced on a mobile app. Security? Conducted by two metal pillars, which screen for weapons, and by a human “airport-service concierge” (A.S.C.), who swabs bags for explosives and then loads them onto the plane. “There are no overhead bins,” Wilcox explained, “so there’s not going to be anyone standing on top of you for two minutes.” Once the plane lands, bag handles are sanitized and summarily stepped back from. “Touch less is obviously the theme here,” Wilcox said. JSX is also installing plastic shields between seats and

seat rows. “They’re removable,” he said, “so if you’re travelling with somebody you live with, for example, there’s no need for that”—in theory.

Masks? Mandatory. “We’ve had a few people come in without them—people who weren’t from L.A., who haven’t gotten the memo,” Nick Sturtevant, an A.S.C., said. “They come in and say, ‘Oh, sorry, we don’t have masks. Do you have any?’” When he informs them that they can purchase one for three dollars, “miraculously, they’ll pull out their bandanna or the mask they happened to have.” Ariana Diaz, JSX’s brand manager, said that the mask policy is enforced in the lounge as well. But what about the gentleman over there in the armchair, with an N95 mask resting on top of his head like a pair of Persols? “That’s probably a very special case,” she said. “Ideally, that would be addressed.” (It was, via a P.A. announcement.) Nearby, a young man in a Gucci tracksuit, sans mask, said into his phone, “We’re in the lounge—go look at Instagram.” Diaz shook her head.

An A.S.C. named David Harris said that the Vegas flights had been pretty smooth. “The customers we’re getting aren’t intoxicated,” he said. “No bachelorette parties.” At 9:50 A.M., the passengers boarded, and the plane taxied away. Back in the hangar, Marcell Jones, another A.S.C., grabbed a canister of Clorox wipes. “We always did tabletops, countertops, the coffee machine, and touch screens, but we never did the seats,” she said, wiping down the armchair previously occupied by the “very special case.” “I like it, to be honest,” she said of the new policy. “Look at the Domino’s commercials saying, ‘Now, when your pizza comes out of the oven, nobody has to touch it.’ Why were you touching it before?”

Harris began preparing for the next round of passengers. He predicted that JSX flights would remain calm for now, even though cities have started reopening. “You can say ‘Vegas is open, New York’s open,’” Harris said. “But it’s about restoring confidence in people. A lot of them are saying, ‘Eh, even though Vegas is open, I’m probably not going to do that this summer.’” Referring to the twenty-nine passengers who had just departed, he added, “Well, you’re always going to have the people who will go.”

—Sheila Marikar

ANNALS OF HISTORY

CROSSROADS

A scholar of the plague thinks that pandemics wreak havoc—and open minds.

BY LAWRENCE WRIGHT



Great crises tend to bring profound social change, for good or ill. The consequences of wars and economic depressions have been amply studied; the consequences of pandemics, less so. This spring, in order to understand our possible future, I decided to look at the past through the eyes of Gianna Pomata, a retired professor at the Institute of the History of Medicine, at Johns Hopkins University. When we first talked, on Skype, she immediately compared COVID-19 to the bubonic plague that struck Europe in the fourteenth century—“not in the number of dead but in terms of shaking up the way people think.” She went on, “The Black

Death really marks the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of something else.” That something else was the Renaissance.

Since retiring, Pomata has returned to her home town, the old city of Bologna. “You know Bologna, right?” she asked in that first conversation, on March 27th. Decades ago, I was the best man at a wedding there. I recalled the giant churches, the red-tiled roofs, the marble walkways under arched porticoes; a stately city, low-slung, amber-hued, full of students and indomitable old couples. During the Middle Ages, Bologna was home to more than a hundred towers, the skyscrapers of their era,

which served as showplaces of wealth and ambition for powerful oligarchs. Two of the remaining ones have become symbols of Bologna: one slightly out of plumb, the other as cockeyed as its cousin in Pisa. “You remember the Piazza Maggiore, the very heart of the city near the two towers?” Pomata said. “That’s where I live.”

Pomata’s country had been in a nationwide lockdown since March 10th. “In Italy, the streets are always crowded, night and day,” she said. “Our cities are medieval, made for a different way of life—not for cars but for people. Right now, to see them empty of people is so sad.” When we spoke, the number of confirmed cases in Italy had reached eighty-six thousand. Only the United States had a higher number, having just eclipsed China.

Pomata, who is sixty-nine, has brown hair, with a long, open face. That day, tortoiseshell glasses rested at half-mast on her nose, beneath upward-pointing, quizzical eyebrows. Like me, she was beginning to show the pallor of confinement. Having spent much of her adult life in the United States, her English had little accent, but she retained an Italian lilt, lingering on the broad vowels.

I asked Pomata to imagine walking out of her apartment six hundred and seventy-two years ago, during the Black Death. How would Bologna appear different? “If you try to imagine a plague-stricken city in the Middle Ages, the first thing you’d see would be dead people on the streets,” she said. “Just as we have to send the Army to take coffins to crematories in other cities, as in Bergamo right now, in the Middle Ages they couldn’t cope with so many dead. The bodies just piled up on the streets.” She paused and said, “I don’t have an idyllic vision of the Middle Ages.”

Italy at the beginning of the fourteenth century was a conglomeration of prosperous city-states that had broken free of the feudal system. Some of them, such as Venice, formed merchant republics, which became seedbeds for capitalism. Venice and other coastal cities, including Genoa, Pisa, and Amalfi, set up trading networks and established outposts throughout the Mediterranean and as far away as the Black Sea. Other Italian cities, such as Bologna, became

The social tumult caused by the Black Death helped lead to the Renaissance.

free communes, which meant that peasants fleeing feudal estates were granted freedom once they entered the city walls. Serfs became artisans. A middle class began to form. The early fourteenth century was robust and ambitious. Then, suddenly, people began to die.

Bologna was a stronghold of medical teaching. The city's famous university, established in 1088, is the oldest in the world. "What they had we call scholastic medicine," Pomata told me. "When we say 'scholastic,' we mean something that is very abstract, not concrete, not empirical." European scholars at the time studied a number of classical physicians—including Hippocrates, the Greek philosopher of the fifth century B.C. who is considered the father of medicine, and Galen, the second-century Roman who was the most influential medical figure in antiquity—but scholastic medicine was confounded with astrological notions. When the King of France sought to understand the cause of the plague, the medical faculty at the University of Paris blamed a triple conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars in the fortieth degree of Aquarius, which had occurred on March 20, 1345.

"Whether it descended on us mortals through the influence of the heavenly bodies or was sent down by God in His righteous anger to chastise us because of our wickedness, it had begun some years before in the East," Giovanni Boccaccio wrote in the *Decameron*, which was completed by 1353 and is set during the plague in Florence. "At its onset, in men and women alike, certain swellings would develop in the groin or under the armpits, some of which would grow like an ordinary apple and others like an egg." These pus-filled swellings, called buboes, were inflammations of the lymph nodes. They eventually erupted. Internal organs broke down in a bloody froth, and bodies darkened with gangrene, which is why the plague came to be called the Black Death.

Before arriving in Italy, the rampaging contagion had already killed millions of people as it burned through China, Russia, India, Persia, Syria, and Asia Minor. It was said that there were entire territories where nobody was left alive. The source of the disease was sometimes thought to be "miasma," or

air that was considered unhealthy, such as sea breezes. Paradoxically, there was also a folk belief that attendants who cleaned latrines were immune, which led some people to confine themselves for hours a day amid human waste, absorbing the presumed medicinal odors. "The advice of doctors and the power of medicine appeared useless and unavailing," Boccaccio wrote. Some people maintained that "the surest medicine for such an evil disease was to drink heavily, enjoy life's pleasures, and go about singing and having fun, satisfying their appetites by any means available, while laughing at everything." Others, he observed, "formed themselves into companies and lived in isolation from everyone else." The *Decameron* tells of ten friends who shelter in place, entertaining one another with stories while the plague assails Florence. These ribald tales pay little heed to medieval notions of sacredness or piety; indeed, the society that the sequestered young people describe is amoral and cheerfully hypocritical. Priests are portrayed as stupid, lustful, greedy connivers. Illicit sex is exalted. The earthy realism of the *Decameron*, written in Italian vernacular rather than in classical Latin verse, sounded one of the opening notes of the Renaissance.

Pomata told me, "What happens after the Black Death, it's like a wind—fresh air coming in, the fresh air of common sense." The intellectual overthrow of the scholastic-medicine establishment in the Middle Ages was caused by doctors who set aside the classical texts and gradually turned to empirical evidence. It was a revival of medical science, which had been dismissed after the fall of ancient Rome, a thousand years earlier. "After the Black Death, nothing was the same," Pomata said. "What I expect now is something as dramatic is going to happen, not so much in medicine but in economy and culture. Because of danger, there's this wonderful human response, which is to think in a new way."

In the fourteenth century, Tartar warriors in Crimea laid siege to the Black Sea port city of Caffa, which was owned by a group of wealthy Genoese traders. Like so many armies in history, the

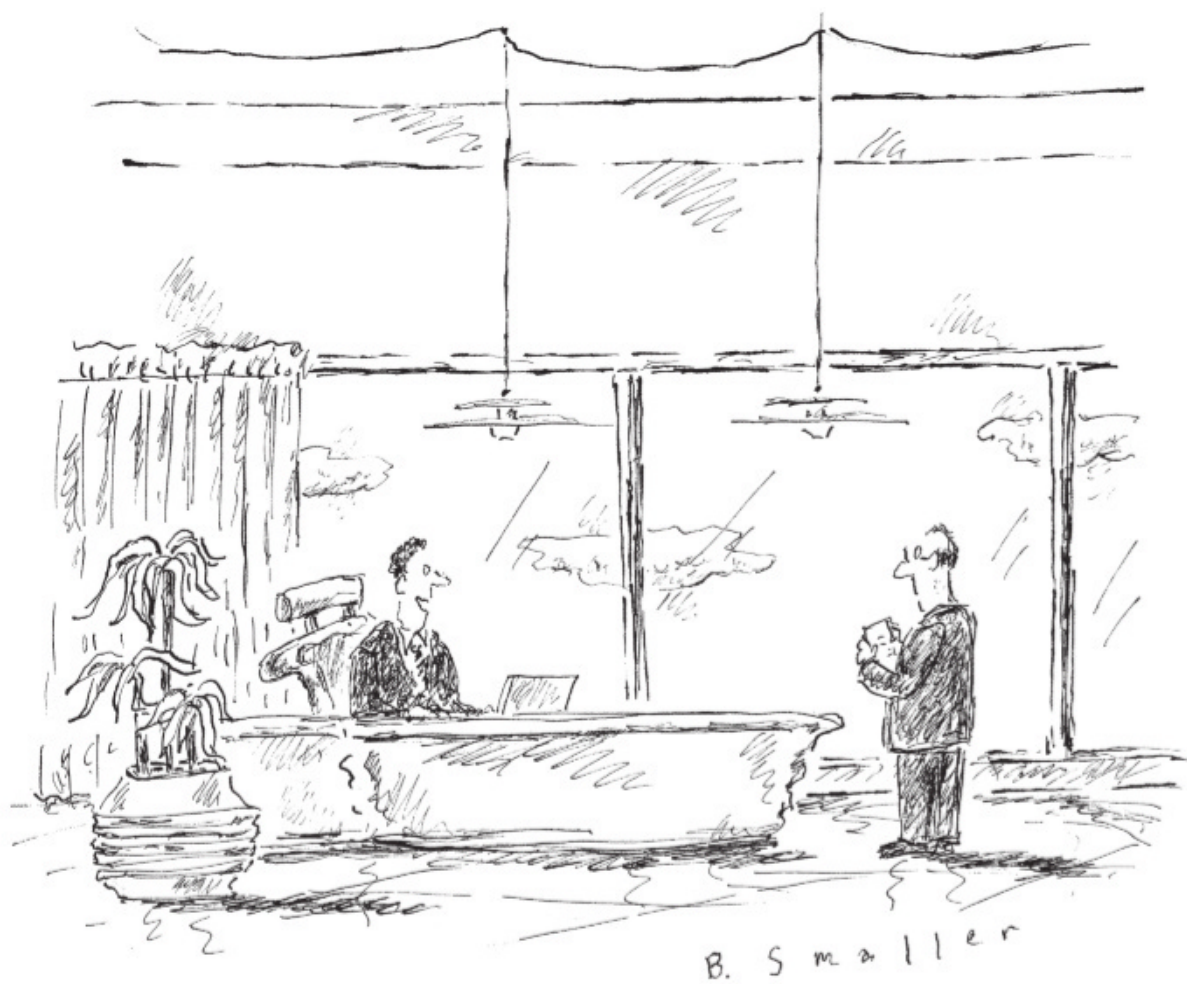
Tartars were also fighting an unseen enemy: they carried with them a horrible disease, which killed some victims in a few days, and left others to die in indolent agony. Before retreating from Caffa, the Tartar general, Khan Jani Beg, ordered the diseased bodies of dead warriors catapulted over the city walls, in one of the first instances of biological warfare. Panicked citizens took to boats, navigating through the Dardanelles into the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean. A dozen ships made it to Sicily, in October, 1347.

Sicilians were appalled to find on their shores boats with dead men still at their oars. Other sailors, dead or barely alive, were in their bunks, covered with foul-smelling sores. The horrified Sicilians drove the ships back to sea, but it was too late. Rats and fleas, the carriers of *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium that causes the plague, quickly infested the port of Messina. By January, Italy was engulfed. Ships arriving in the Venetian vassal state of Ragusa—present-day Dubrovnik—were required to sit at anchor for *quaranta giorni*, or forty days, which is where the term "quarantine" comes from.

Medieval mortality figures are a matter of speculation, but Bologna is believed to have lost half its population in 1348. Cities all over Europe were emptied. That first outbreak, between 1347 and 1351, is estimated to have killed at least seventy-five million people worldwide, and maybe as many as two hundred million.

"Child abandoned the father, husband the wife, wife the husband, one brother the other, one sister the other," a contemporary writer, Marchione di Coppo Stefani, observed. Deep trenches were dug in churchyards. "Those who were responsible for the dead carried them on their backs in the night in which they died and threw them into the ditch," Stefani continued. The next morning, dirt was thrown on the bodies as new corpses were piled on, "layer by layer, just like one puts layers of cheese in a lasagna."

Pomata told me, "Chroniclers of the plague describe the crumbling of the family. At the same time, human beings are creative. They react to this perceived moral decay by creating new institutions. For instance, they create



*"I just think things will work out for the best,
and by the best I mean me."*

boards of health, which are in charge of quarantine." For the first time, hospitals split patients up into specific wards, so that broken bones and wounds, say, were treated separately from diseases. There was also a rise in trade associations, to take care of medical costs and funeral expenses. "So you can see both trends," Pomata said. "On the one hand, the plague works as a kind of acid. On the other hand, people try to re-create ties—and, perhaps, *better ties.*"

When I called Pomata again, on April 7th, using Zoom, she had set up an avatar: a bouquet of plumbago. I asked her why she had chosen it. "There was a big bush of plumbago next to the door of my grandmother's little country house when I was a child," she said. The house was in Sardinia, where Pomata grew up. "I loved my grandmother and I loved that house. So I just love that plant. It's a color I remember from when I was very, very little." Plumbago blossoms are a delicate blue, like a summer afternoon in Texas, where I live, when the color has

almost been bleached out of the sky. Plumbago grows well in the heat.

Pomata's sister, Daniela, is an emergency-room doctor in Bologna, at Sant'Orsola-Malpighi Polyclinic, the largest hospital in Italy. The two sisters live in the same building. "We used to be together constantly, and now I can't see her," Pomata said. From the start of the outbreak, her sister had emphasized that the coronavirus was not an ordinary flu. "She says, 'I've never seen such pneumonias, they're devastating,'" Pomata told me. When we spoke before, there was a fear that Sant'Orsola would run out of beds in its intensive-care unit. Now the crisis had begun to ease.

I asked Pomata if Italians who recovered would be allowed to return to work. "There *is* no work for them," she said. Even before the global economic implosion caused by the coronavirus, unemployment for young Italians was thirty per cent. "What you need is exactly what the Fed is doing in the United States—you inject money into the system."

Pomata's daughter, Catherine, lives

in New York, where she works in the film industry. "I don't like the situation there at all," Pomata said. "She is with her husband, she's not by herself, so that's good. They live in a tiny apartment near Columbia University, on the Upper West Side. Until recently, she was walking to Central Park, but now she doesn't, because she feels that people don't always pay attention to distance." Catherine had sent her mother a video of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, just blocks from Catherine's apartment, which was planning to house a temporary hospital. This underscored the scale of the contagion. "Catherine loves New York," Pomata said. "Living in New York was a dream. But now I think she's very scared."

Another feature of the COVID-19 pandemic reminded Pomata of the Black Death. "We cannot go and visit the dying, we cannot celebrate funerals," she said. "I think, What if something happens to my daughter, and I couldn't even see her body? It just feels intolerable."

"I am reflecting on the idea of disease waves," I said, when Pomata and I spoke again, in May. Scientists were talking about a second wave of COVID-19 in the fall, or perhaps many waves. The 1918 Spanish flu began in the early spring, disappeared in the summer, then returned in the autumn. October, 1918, was the deadliest month in American history. A third wave came in 1919; after that, the disease retreated, having killed at least fifty million people worldwide, including nearly seven hundred thousand Americans. Public-health officials dreaded the day the virus would return. In 1976, it did. This time, it killed only one American, a young Army recruit named David Lewis. Another variant of the same strain returned as a pandemic in 2009, but proved to be less severe than the usual seasonal flu.

The bubonic plague came in three great pandemics. The first, known as the Plague of Justinian, lasted from the sixth century until the eighth, with few letups, ravaging the Byzantine Empire. The second pandemic, the Black Death, arrived in Italy in December, 1347, and spread quickly across Europe. Pilgrims carried it to Mecca the following year.

The plague soon infested Scandinavia. A third of the population of Egypt died. Subsidiary outbreaks continued to appear in Europe for three hundred years. The Great Plague of London, which Daniel Defoe chronicled, hit in 1665. After that, the plague mysteriously faded away.

"There was a much more circumscribed episode in Marseille in the early eighteenth century," Pomata told me. "And that's it for Europe, but not for Asia." The last plague pandemic began in the mid-nineteenth century, in China, and spread to India, where it killed six million people. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the disease journeyed to America, where a Chinese resident of San Francisco was the first to die of it. Henry Gage, the governor of California at the time, tried to play down the outbreak, speculating that white people were immune to the disease; scores died. The plague has never been entirely eradicated, but, with each wave, it may have killed so efficiently that it starved itself of human hosts. Having persisted in flea and rat populations, the bacterium continues to infect humans from time to time. As many as two thousand cases are reported to the World Health Organization every year, often including a handful in the American Southwest.

The Black Death caused economic and demographic collapse throughout Europe, but some devastated regions rebounded surprisingly quickly. London, the engine of English prosperity even in the Middle Ages, lost an estimated forty thousand citizens, out of a population of perhaps seventy thousand, but it soon enjoyed greater affluence than ever. I asked Pomata about Italy's economic experience after the Black Death. "It was a great time to be an artisan," she said. "Suddenly, labor was scarce, and, because of that, market wages *had* to go up. The bourgeoisie, the artisans, and the workers started to have a stronger voice, simply because labor was scarce. When you don't have people, you have to pay them better." The relative standing of capital and labor reversed: landed gentry were battered by plunging food prices and rising wages, while former serfs, who had been too impoverished

to leave anything but a portion of land to their eldest sons, increasingly found themselves able to spread their wealth among all their children, including their daughters. Women, many of them widows, entered depopulated professions, such as weaving and brewing.

At one point in our conversations, Pomata confessed, "I'm so upset and emotional, it's difficult to think clearly." I asked what was troubling her. "First of all, it is rediscovering the extreme fragility of life," she said. "So much of our way of life is insane. Right now, for instance, in Italy we don't have face masks." Such masks used to be manufactured there, but today this work has been outsourced to China. If the pandemic had struck in the early nineteen-nineties, she believes, Italy would have responded more effectively from the start, and not just because masks would have been on hand. "Our national health-care system was better funded, we had more hospitals, the hospitals were better equipped, they had more intensive-care units, and all that has been cut, cut, *cut* for austerity policies dictated by Brussels"—that is, the European Union. Nevertheless, current talk about how the crisis could spell the end of the E.U. frightens her. "I

am a Europeanist," she said. "I have always believed in Europe as a culture and a political idea. But right now I see this. And I'm very angry."

Pomata mentioned an essay that Mario Draghi, the former president of the European Central Bank, had published in the *Financial Times*, in March, suggesting that European leaders were questioning some fundamental ideas about economic growth. Draghi has been at "the pinnacle of the European bureaucracy that has been enforcing the economic policy called austerity," Pomata explained. The southern tier of European countries—mainly Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Greece—have been struggling with heavy debt loads; northern countries, including Germany and the Netherlands, which hold the debt, insist that it must be repaid on a rigid schedule. She described the E.U.'s ethic as "Spending more than we have is heresy, and we should never do it." She went on, "The problem, as John Maynard Keynes said, is that when you are in a crisis you don't maintain that stance, because it makes the crisis worse. Which is what happened in the crisis of 1929. He said what you do is build an infrastructure—you build a pyramid if you have to, build *anything*. You create



jobs and the economy doesn't stop."

She continued, "For a long time, European bureaucrats and the European ruling class have been firmly anti-Keynesian. And Draghi was part of that class—he was at the top of it! And suddenly he writes in the *Financial Times* saying the opposite of what he has been preaching all these years."

Draghi described the coronavirus as "a human tragedy of potentially biblical proportions." He added, "The challenge we face is how to act with sufficient strength and speed to prevent the recession from morphing into a prolonged depression, made deeper by a plethora of defaults leaving irreversible damage. It is already clear that the answer must involve a significant increase in public debt."

Pomata said, "I'm glad, at least, that Draghi spoke up. But that ruling class, the European elite, has to really rethink." Since then, the leaders of Germany and France have proposed creating grants, financed by collective borrowing, that would help prevent the poorer regions of Europe from falling into a lengthy recession. At the end of May, the E.U. presented a two-trillion-dollar coronavirus-response plan, with the aim of reviving flattened economies, especially in the south. If the member countries approve the plan, it could mark the moment when the E.U. moves toward a federal framework, like that of the United States. Germany's finance

minister, Olaf Scholz, has compared the measure to the actions taken in 1790 by Alexander Hamilton, the architect of the American financial system, to have the U.S. government assume the Revolutionary War debts of the states.

Pomata described the pandemic as "an accelerator of mental renewal." She explained, "We listen more, perhaps. We're more ready to talk to one another. Once again, I give Draghi's example, because I'm so struck by it. An anthropologist should write about this kind of thing. Draghi's world was very stable. He had some beliefs about how the economy should be handled. And suddenly he's in a whirlwind, and he has to think anew."

In 1345, shortly before the plague devastated Verona, the Italian poet and scholar Petrarch was rummaging through the library of the city's cathedral. Among the crumbling manuscripts there, he found letters written by Marcus Tullius Cicero, the Roman statesman and orator who is sometimes credited with making Latin a literary language. Until Petrarch's discovery, Cicero was almost totally forgotten, as were most of the great figures of the classical era. Reading Cicero's letters—or other abandoned works, like Livy's history of Rome—revealed to Petrarch how degraded civilization had become. He christened the period after the fall of Rome the Dark Ages. The beauty of Cicero's language,

the rigor of his thought, inflamed Petrarch with an ambition to restore the glory of the past. And that meant opening the minds of his contemporaries to the possibility of change.

"For Petrarch, it was about disliking his time and his age and the condition of Italy," Pomata said. He expressed his frustration with his era by writing letters to the ancients. "It could be like someone today disliking the present state of America and wanting to talk to Thomas Jefferson or Martin Luther King."

The Middle Ages didn't end definitively until the fall of Constantinople, in 1453, when scholars of the Byzantine Empire migrated to Europe, especially to Italy, bringing their libraries with them. But new thinking was already under way, spurred partly by Petrarch's embrace of old thinking, which is why he is often cited as the instigating figure of the Renaissance. Artists reclaimed ancient techniques for drawing and painting with perspective. Musicians recovered melody. Humanism unsettled the stagnant rule of religion over people's minds. Michelangelo, da Vinci, Palladio, Brunelleschi, Boccaccio, Petrarch, Machiavelli, and Dante Alighieri became foundation stones of European thought. Italian explorers, including Christopher Columbus, Giovanni da Verrazzano, and Amerigo Vespucci, changed the map of the world. Galileo established the scientific method. The Italian Renaissance was perhaps the greatest efflorescence of science and art in Western civilization.

Before the coronavirus pandemic hit, Italy's economy was already one of the weakest in Europe—its gross domestic product was at a dead stop. The U.S., meanwhile, had reached almost full employment, before plummeting to a level of joblessness not seen since the Great Depression. Congress and the Federal Reserve have acted forcefully, and a recent drop in unemployment suggests that some American jobs will come back quickly. Yet Jerome Powell, the Fed chairman, has predicted "a long road" to recovery. Both in the U.S. and in other countries, an era of significant unemployment is likely, creating a labor surplus—the reverse of the situation after the Black Death.

We seem to be at another point when society will make radical adjustments,



"More absentee ballots."

for good or ill. History offers mixed lessons. The Plague of Athens, in 430 B.C., led to a protracted period of lawlessness and immorality. Citizens lost faith in Athenian democracy, which never regained its standing. The millions of deaths caused by the 1918 Spanish flu and the First World War brought on women's suffrage but also inaugurated the Roaring Twenties, which featured disparities of wealth unequalled until the present day. After the shock of the Second World War, America transformed itself into the strongest economic power in history, largely through an expansive middle class. But after 9/11 the United States forged a dark path. Instead of taking advantage of surging patriotism and heightened international good will, America invaded Iraq and tortured suspects at Guantánamo; at home, prosperous Americans essentially barricaded themselves off from their fellow-citizens, allowing racial and economic inequalities to fester. The country we are now was formed in no small part by the fear and the anger that still linger from that tragic day.

Pomata and I began to speculate again on potential positive outcomes of the current pandemic. "People are noticing in Venice that the water is suddenly transparent," she said. "It's clean. And even I, here in Bologna, I open the window, and usually it smells foul because of too many *motorini*, and now it smells nice. It's like being in the countryside."

In Austin, the city where I live, I also have treasured the absence of the usual traffic roar, the neighborhood streets given over to pedestrians and exhilarated children on bicycles. I have been inspired by photographs of Los Angeles looking eerily pristine, and by newfound vistas of the Himalayas from Punjab, hidden for decades by smog. Could these images have a galvanizing effect, like the 1972 photograph of Earth taken from space by the crew of Apollo 17, which helped bring the environmental movement to life? The atmosphere feels scrubbed clean; the stars are sharper and more visible. The relationship between humanity and the natural world is more balanced and harmonious. Such ecological restorations, of course, have come at the cost of collapsed economies and punctured dreams. Traffic will necessarily resume, oil will be pumped, airplanes

will take off. But I wonder if the glorious experience of living with less pollution, however momentary, will linger in our consciousness as an achievable destiny—and as a reminder that major transformations are possible.

Toward the end of spring, Italy began to open again. "Starting tomorrow, they're going to relax the rules a bit," Pomata told me, with excitement. "You're supposed to be able to



go and visit 'relatives,' but of course nobody knows what is meant by relatives. A fiancée? A lover? A mistress? We're making lots of jokes about the meaning of a relative in Italy at this moment!"

Pomata's optimism was further buoyed by the fact that her country's shutdown, cohesive and well managed, had worked: new infections were petering out there. Italy had six thousand new cases a day when spring started and only two hundred a day when it ended. In the meantime, the epicenter of the contagion had moved to my own part of the world. By early July, Texas was reporting more than nine thousand infections a day, and was one of several Southern states that had boosted the spread of the disease to record levels. Hospitals in Houston were nearing full capacity, and Austin was preparing its convention center as a spillover medical outpost. Governor Greg Abbott, who had begun aggressively reopening the state in April and had even forbidden mayors to enforce rules concerning the use of face masks, now reluctantly tapped the brakes, warning of a "massive outbreak." Texas had ended up basically in the same condition that Italy was in when Pomata and I first spoke.

Pomata was shocked by the direction that the pandemic was taking in the United States. She understood the reasons for the mass protests and po-

litical rallies, but, as a medical historian, she was uncomfortably reminded of the religious processions that had spread the plague in medieval Europe. And, as someone who had obediently remained indoors for months, she was affronted by the refusal of so many Americans to wear masks at the grocery store and maintain social distancing. In an e-mail, she condemned those who blithely ignored scientific advice, writing, "What I see right now in the United States is that the pandemic has not led to new creative thinking but, on the contrary, has strengthened all the worst, most stereotypical, and irrational ways of thinking. I'm very sorry for the state of your country, which seems to be in the grip of a horrible attack of unreason." She continued, "I'm sorry because I love it, and have received so much from it."

I understood her gloomy assessment, but also felt that America could be on the verge of much needed change. Like wars and depressions, a pandemic offers an X-ray of society, allowing us to see all the broken places. It was possible that Americans would do nothing about the fissures exposed by the pandemic: the racial inequities, the poisonous partisanship, the governmental incompetence, the disrespect for science, the loss of standing among nations, the fraying of community bonds. Then again, when people confront their failures, they have the opportunity to mend them.

We agreed on one thing: nothing about our societies could truly be fixed as long as everyone remained stuck inside. At one point, when Pomata and I were fantasizing about the end of our captivity, I asked her what she wanted to do when she finally went out again. "I don't actually feel starved for human contact," she said, with a bit of surprise. "I've never written so many letters as in this period of my life!" She then noted, "Of course, I see my sister from the window, and we cannot hug each other." Above all, Pomata said, she longed to visit her mother, who lives in Sardinia, and to swim there again. This summer, she plans to make the trip. "Older people need exercise," she said. "I don't spend time at the beach gossiping with friends. I don't even take the sun. I just go immediately into the sea." ♦

ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

CASUAL EVERYDAY

The slob-chic of our pandemic life style.

BY PATRICIA MARX



With so many people homebound these past few months, indoors has become the new outdoors. It is where you exercise, digitally chat with friends, and, of course, work. But it is also still the indoors, where you sleep, eat, and putter. This can make for frequent wardrobe changes. Or you can give up and wear the same shredded sweatpants day after day. In April, a Florida circuit judge named Dennis Bailey sent a letter to local lawyers about proper attire during Zoom court hearings. “It is remarkable how many ATTORNEYS appear inappropriately on camera,” he wrote. “We’ve seen many lawyers in casual shirts and blouses, with no concern for ill-groom-

ing, in bedrooms with the master bed in the background, etc. One male lawyer appeared shirtless and one female attorney appeared still in bed, still under the covers. So, please, if you don’t mind, let’s treat court hearings as court hearings.”

Parts of the country are slowly reopening, but for many of us our homes will still be headquarters. “I think unrepentant sloppiness is the new fashion-forward,” Robert Kraft, a record producer and songwriter, told me. Kraft, who lives in Los Angeles, keeps a Brooks Brothers button-down shirt on the back of his desk chair for Zoom meetings but otherwise dresses in Adidas sweatpants, an R.B.G. or Steely Dan T-shirt, and a base-

ball cap. Gena Feith, an artist in Washington, D.C., said, “If I put on non-pajamas, I feel a heightened sense of accomplishment, as if I’m Robert Caro.” (The biographer is known for wearing a jacket and tie to work alone in his personal office.) Polly McCall, a psychotherapist, thinks that there’s a psychological component to our sloppiness. “People are relishing the feeling that they are getting away with something,” she said. “We’re conducting business and making money, but—ha ha!—we’re in our pajamas.”

Recent retail-sales data reflect a world where there’s nobody to dress up for except your cat. In April, clothing sales fell seventy-nine per cent, the largest decline since records have been kept. But track-suit purchases were up seventy per cent, and sweatpants eighty per cent. Sales of pajamas rose a hundred and forty-three per cent. Evidently, pants are cancelled (unless they come with an elastic waistband). Their sales declined thirteen per cent. The new focus is above the waist.

Now that so many items in our closets are taking early retirement, what should we put on when our Webcams are turned off? I got recommendations from thirty-five or so people working from home. For those who’ve never bought clothes online—a cohort that might consist solely of my ninety-three-year-old mother and Kimmy Schmidt—check the specifics of the return policy: it is easy to arrange for a refund or an exchange from most companies nowadays, but some third-party sellers and eBay and Etsy vendors operate on a buyers-keepers system.

Let’s start with pajama pants, which may be the closest that clothing gets to comfort food. Introduced to Europeans in the nineteenth century by British colonialists returning from Asia and the Middle East, these loose trousers with drawstrings, meant for lazing around in, were initially worn in the West only by men. Perhaps because pants were associated with the suffrage movement, many women stuck to the custom of wearing undergarments, nightgowns, or day clothes to bed. Both sexes sometimes wore nightshirts, which the writer Lawrence Langner, in his book “The Importance of Wearing Clothes,” describes as “a bulky shapeless shirt hanging from the neck like a deflated balloon.” By the nineteen-twenties, women were getting into pajamas, too, a revolutionary change

You owe it to your downstairs neighbors to either wear slippers or levitate.

often attributed to Coco Chanel, who, the legend goes, started the trend at the end of the First World War, by strolling along the Riviera in her “beach pyjamas,” bell-bottoms so amply cut they looked like billowing sails. Pajama scholars place this historic promenade anywhere from 1918 to 1922, and within a few years fashionable women were lounging around on yachts and in boudoirs in their slacks of silk, cotton, or crêpe de Chine. The garments were so common in the resort town of Juan-les-Pins that it became known as Pyjamaland.

Having started outside and migrated inside, pajamas today straddle the public and the private, and can be androgynous, come-hither, prim, or the kind of garb that Peter Pan’s Lost Boys might wear. “Many days, I’ll change out of my sleeping pajamas into my awake pajamas,” Anna del Gaizo, a writer in Los Angeles, told me. Instead of popping an Ambien, try the pajamas from the hundred-and-thirty-six-year-old Swiss company Hanro. They have minimal adornment and are made of silky mercerized cotton that’s so soft you’ll dream you’re a marshmallow. They aren’t cheap, but they last for years. I like the model somewhat mysteriously named Moments Crop, whose three-quarter sleeves and pedal-pusher legs are trimmed with a hint of lace that even the Shakers wouldn’t kick out of bed (\$198). Want to save the planet while going (masked) to the grocery store? Satiny unisex pajama tops and bottoms from We Are HAH, in West Hollywood, come in collages of flamboyant florals and stripes and are recycled from the plastic bottles that you conscientiously didn’t buy in Aisle 3 (\$249). The cherry-red two-piece Daydream set from the lingerie company Skarlett Blue—a cropped tee with snug bottoms—looks like long underwear that got shrunk in the wash. It’s the perfect thing to wear while watching TV or, if you are Mrs. Claus, seducing your husband (\$98).

Women started raiding men’s pajama drawers in 1934, the year they saw “It Happened One Night,” in which Claudette Colbert wears Clark Gable’s p.j.’s. (His character had packed multiple pairs of pajamas and, apparently, only one suit, but that’s show biz.) The most debonair examples, for both genders, are from the London haberdasher Budd. The ladies’ models have mother-of-pearl buttons,

pipled edges, and rounded notched collars that look like petunias, and are fashioned from a variety of fabrics, such as linen, silk, and cashmere, in colors that are surprising but not too surprising, like lilac and iris (\$356–\$493).

It’s not clear whether sleepwear manufacturers knew that the lockdown would coincide with the arrival of “Tiger King” on Netflix, but there certainly are scads of big-cat prints to choose from while lounging in front of the tube. From the Philadelphia-based company Printfresh come poplin-cotton pajama sets onto which artisans in Jaipur, India, have silk-screened images of cheetahs lurking amid red blossoms (\$128). The British lounge-wear designer Olivia von Halle has many options for safari-animal prints on silk, but the one I covet is adorned with prancing zebras (\$480). For men who aren’t afraid to sleep in Freudian symbols, Desmond & Dempsey has a cotton sleep shirt decorated with coiled snakes (\$112). There’s a pajama set printed with tigers, too (\$219). If you are against wearing fur, even in a textile depiction, Desmond & Dempsey carries a cotton camisole-and-shorts combo in a winsome green pineapple pattern (\$125).

To hide from your roommate’s big cats, try Onepiece’s camouflage-themed hooded jumpsuit (\$104). It’s cute enough to wear while walking the dog. Ditto the pink-and-white striped shorts from Rails, which you could also wear to your candy-stripping job (\$168). If you want to step up your game—and take the trash out in high style—I suggest the Party Pajamas from Sleeper, a Ukrainian label that audaciously bills its line as the “World’s First Walking Sleepwear.” With a fringe of marabou feathers around the cuffs and hem, this festive ensemble of palazzo pants and draped top looks like something Doris Day would host a soirée in. It comes in five colors, but I will let you get them only in aqua with red piping and white feathers or black with black piping and feathers (\$224–\$320).

It’s debatable whether a nightshirt is more or less schlumpy than pajamas, but it is half as difficult to put on. The most casual in this class are the oversized T-shirts from the Brooklyn-based shop Recliner, which are comfy and loose but not so blobby that they make you look like an amoeba. Sewn from a

tissue-thin jersey blend of wood pulp and spandex that is designed to regulate body temperature and, as the company’s Web site puts it, “do away with unnecessary tangling in bed” (finally, a problem I don’t have), they are available in mini, midi, and maxi (\$70–\$85).

Just because you are sheltering in place doesn’t mean your nightshirt can’t face the world. The French company Kilo-metre.Paris turns vintage nightshirts such as you might find at a European flea market into wearable works of art, by hand-embroidering them with images from specific cities—the New York City “pyjama shirt” depicts a large Empire State Building in navy stitching, and the London example has Big Ben. On the cuffs, sewn in red, are the landmark’s geographic coördinates. The items are not cheap, but look! Some are on sale, and are still not cheap (\$350–\$420). If you want cheap, H & M has a nice selection of men’s and women’s pajamas—including an appealing pajama shirt and matching shorts in black viscose with a pattern of tiny white beach chairs, which could rationalize your idling away the afternoon drinking piña coladas by the sea, by which I mean the bathtub (\$24.99).

Want first-class sleepwear at economy-class prices? Here’s a tip: eBay regularly lists brand-new pajamas from airline amenity kits, sold by passengers who, I’m guessing, were flying premium on the company dime and would hock a family member if there were a few bucks to be had. I spied a set from American Airlines made by the mattress company Casper (\$22) and a Lufthansa cotton sleep suit from the luxury German label Van Laack (\$38.88). The cotton pajamas supplied to customers by Emirates Airlines—light-gray top with shawl collar, dark-gray bottoms with drawstring waist—are, according to the airline, the “world’s first moisturizing sleepwear,” releasing pellets of kelp onto your skin, a luxury I’d pay not to receive.

With the right white waffle-weave bathrobe, you can convince yourself that quarantine is actually a stay at an appallingly understaffed spa. The offering from Parachute is a socially distancing crowd-pleaser: made of a hundred per cent Turkish cotton, it’s soft, unisex, and washable, and it has pockets for the tips you give yourself after your facial (\$119). If you’d like to feel like a plush stuffed animal,

Towel Selections has cozy, affordable robes in terry cloth or fleece (\$27.95–\$55.95), in dozens of colors whose names sound like flavors of frozen yogurt (Pink Nectar, Nougat). I'd be O.K. with giving karaoke back to Japan, but kimonos are a keeper. My favorites are hand-dyed in Bali by Suku Home, an Australia-based company founded by an Indonesian woman. I particularly like the mid-length robe made from white silky bamboo rayon and decorated with feathery dapples of turquoise, and also the pink one that looks as if Jackson Pollock started to throw red paint at it but gave up (\$160). Cheaper (just under a hundred dollars) are the attractive cotton kimonos in hand-printed patterns available on Etsy from a shop called Susannah Cotton. I myself am a sucker for seersucker, maybe because it evokes an era when people pretended that everything was fine. Matouk, a century-old linens company in Fall River, Massachusetts, makes dapper seersucker robes (\$185). Recliner's silk robe speckled with colorful sleeping pills is whimsical and chic, but maybe not a good choice to wear to your Zoom therapy session (\$195).

If you live in an apartment, you owe it to your downstairs neighbors to either wear slippers or levitate. If you live somewhere else, slippers are a thoughtful house present for your feet. The best of the fluffy are Uggs. The sheepskin slides in colors such as retro mint and neon yellow will make your feet look like a couple of nouveau-riche bichons frises (\$100). Or you can wear synthetic fluff from an Amazon seller named Crazy Lady—but who's judging (\$17.99)? To complement your smoking jacket and cravat, may I propose the sumptuous and incomparably comfortable Stubbs & Wootton velvet or needlepoint loafers, from, where else, Palm Beach? There are approximately a million designs, each with a quirky emblem on the vamp, ranging from a face-masked bust of Mars, the god of war, to an image of a screw on the right shoe and a U on the left (\$500).

Some slippers whisper "convalescent," but not the high-quality Wicked Good Moccasins for men and women from L. L. Bean, which say "urbanite masquerading as cabin-dwelling outdoorsman"; they come lined with deerskin or shearling (\$78–\$89). The Japanese, in order

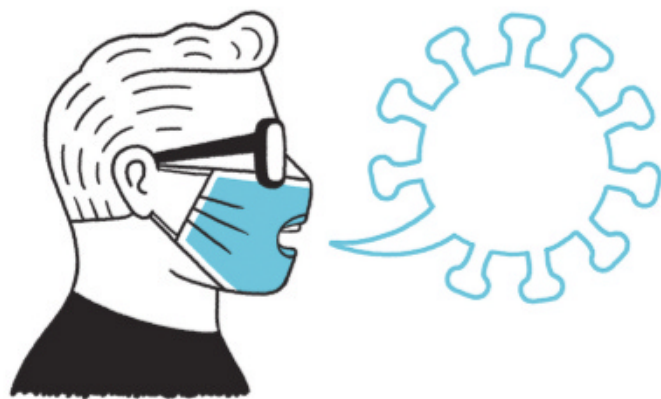
to keep outside dirt from sneaking inside, customarily change into slippers as soon as they enter a house. It figures that they make marvellous slippers—from slides that look as if they are constructed from colorful pot holders to Rikumo's "room shoes," mules that are so minimalist and calm-looking you can give up meditating (\$67). Muji has two cushiony versions of the room shoe, one in a striped jersey and the other in a solid twill (\$14.90). From Denmark (by way of Romanian factories), there are Glerups, sturdy hand-felted slippers, with a leather or rubber sole, that mold to your feet over time. Shaped like open-backed galoshes, they'd be terrific for an aspirational hobbit (\$76–\$95). Judith Thurman, a writer for this magazine, wears out one pair of black ballet-style satin Isotoner slippers every two months or so (\$24). And, since you've been home-schooling your children and growing pineapples on your windowsill, why not go all the way down the D.I.Y. road and crochet a pair of slippers for your baby or yourself—particularly ones patterned after Converse high-tops (\$9.90 for the pattern on Etsy)? Or just buy a pair (\$29.32–\$31.56).

When the sleepwear finally comes off, what goes on? "The exterminator came and I put on a shirt. It was very exciting," Sarah Rose Siskind, a science-comedy writer in New York, said. Otherwise, the answer tends to be sweatpants—also, for some reason, called joggers, if they're tapered at the ankle. These baggy bottoms, which Karl Lagerfeld called "a sign of defeat," seem to be out-selling jeans, which are considered unnecessarily restrictive and rather hoity-toity for these times. As a Twitterer put it in March, "People who are quarantining in jeans: what are you trying to prove?" If you want to look as though you're wearing sweats on purpose and not because you've thrown in the towel, go unduly big and pair them with a tank top. Joah Brown's Oversized or Empire sweatpants send that message (\$128–\$138). For an "all dressed up and nowhere to go but the living room" look, Club Monaco has a narrow-legged satin tuxedo-striped number with matching sweatshirt (\$129). The creamy-soft moisture-wicking "performance joggers" sold at Vuori have pockets for your phone and come highly recommended, even if performance for

you means solving the crossword puzzle (\$84). The belted cargo-style version from Cotton Citizen is flattering enough to transcend the label of sweatpants, and the many tie-dyed options would have thrilled Ken Kesey (\$355; tie-dyed, \$225). Men: the Ace sweats from Mack Weldon have zippered pockets, a tailored silhouette, and ribbed cuffs, and are made of French terry with just the slightest amount of stretch. They come in thirteen colors (why?), and you could wear them outside (remember outside?) (\$78). Uniqlo's sweatpants (for men, women, and kids) are the Honda Civic of ath-leisure: simple, sporty, durable, and cheap. Plus, they have pockets and no logos. I have a pair in navy that have not pilled or become sad-shaped despite being nearly as old as the original gray knit workout attire, created in the nineteen-twenties by a French clothing merchant named Émile Camuset (\$15–\$30).

Not too long ago, leggings were something you dug out of the costume trunk for a play set in medieval times. Today, they are an essential component of active and inactive wear. A friend has eleven pairs of black leggings and wears them every day, her favorites being from J. Crew—which just filed for bankruptcy, so act fast (\$69.50). The leggings from Alo Yoga (\$72–\$150) and Beyond Yoga (\$50–\$110) are said to be the most comfortable; P.E. Nation's are the best suited for exercise (\$69–\$139), and those sold by Koral are the slinkiest (especially the Lustrous model, with a wide waistband; \$75–\$96). The leggings that make me cheer out loud are from the print-on-demand clothing Web site RageOn. They feature a glamorous color drawing of Ruth Bader Ginsburg's head, blown up so big that it'll cover both your legs (\$35.95).

As some businesses around the country reopen, our clothes may be making their way out of our closets. Are you ready for them? Will you be able to walk in heels, let alone shoes that tie? Will your pants fit after all those lockdown carbohydrates? Is it possible to wear lipstick with a mask? Do you remember how buttons work? Perhaps we should acquaint ourselves with a few of the relics in our wardrobe. "When I'm in a really bad mood, I'll make myself put on real clothes, and it does actually work," Josh Beraha, a rabbi in Washington, D.C., told me. "I even put on a belt yesterday." ♦



LEXICON FOR A PANDEMIC

BY JAY MARTEL

Maskhole: An individual who wears a mask in a way that makes it completely ineffective—e.g., below the nose, under the chin, on the back of the head.

Face naked: The state of facial exposure that occurs when an individual declines to wear a mask in public. For example, “Pence went all face naked to the Mayo Clinic.”

Body mullet: What most people wear on Zoom calls: a nice top and, below the waist, underwear or less. (“Business up top, party down below.”)

The NOVID-19: The nineteen minutes after a too-close interaction with a maskless stranger during which you experience a thickness in your throat and a certainty that you’re dying. This sometimes lasts longer if frantic hand washing, antiseptic gargling, and estate planning are not readily available.

Overdistancing: When the guy in front of you in line has a metric understanding of the six in six feet, allowing twenty feet to open up between him and the next person in line, which then allows others to interpret that next person as the end of the line and to cut in front of you.

Domino distancing: When the person behind you in line stands too close, causing you to crowd the person in front of you, and on and on until everyone dies.

Emotional distancing: Deciding that now really isn’t the time to make big decisions about a relationship or, for that matter, to have a conversation about it.

Covideo: A short video featuring a quar-

antined individual’s child doing something adorable and/or profane, the public sharing of which falls somewhere between cute and a cry for help.

Stockholm syndrome: The assumption that everyone would be just fine without any government restrictions.

Someday, Noneday, Whoseday?, Whensday?, Blursday, Whyday?, Doesn’tmatterday: Days of the week.

Parenting: The ability to figure out why the PlayStation isn’t working with the Wi-Fi.

Body Zoom-morphia: Finding your own image on a group video call so unappealing that you are unable to focus on anything else.

Quorumtime: The minimum number of family members necessary to decide what to watch on TV.

Pan-demic: A potentially dangerous increase in the baking of bread in a quarantined home.

COVID-30: Formerly COVID-15; the amount of weight gained by an average adult during quarantine. Sometimes related to a pan-demic.

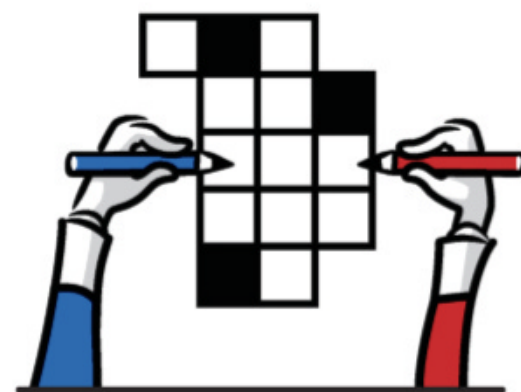
Helter shelter: That moment in the quarantine day when everything seems dirty and chaotic and you feel like saying, “Fuck it, let’s go outside. I don’t care if we die and a bunch of other people do, too.”

Flattening the curve: Trying to fit into your jeans after three months of sweatpants. (See COVID-30.)

Germophobe: Formerly, crazy people (e.g., Howard Hughes); now everyone except crazy people.

Going viral: No longer used. ♦

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THE
NEW YORKER

BACK TO THE JUNGLE

Trump is helping a meat-processing titan leverage the pandemic to strip workers of protections.

BY JANE MAYER

On June 22nd, in the baking heat of a parking lot a few miles inland from Delaware's beaches, several dozen poultry workers, many of them Black or Latino, gathered to decry the conditions at a local poultry plant owned by one of President Donald Trump's biggest campaign contributors. "We're here for a reason that is atrocious," Nelson Hill, an official with the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, told the small but boisterous crowd, which included top Democratic officials from the state, among them Senator Chris Coons. The union, part of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., represents some 1.3 million laborers in poultry-processing and meatpacking plants, as well as workers in grocery stores and retail establishments. Its members, many defined as "essential" workers—without the option of staying home—have been hit extraordinarily hard by the coronavirus. The union estimates that nearly thirty thousand of its workers in the food and health-care sectors have contracted COVID-19, and that two hundred and thirty-eight of those have died.

For the previous forty-two years, a thousand or so laborers at the local processing plant, in Selbyville, had been represented by Local 27. Just two years earlier, the workers there had ratified a new five-year contract. But, Hill told the crowd, in the middle of the pandemic, as the number of infected workers soared, the plant's owner, Mountaire Corporation—one of the country's largest purveyors of chicken—conspired, along with Donald Trump, to "kick us out."

Hill, who is Black and from a working-class family on the Delmarva Peninsula—a scrubby stretch of farmland that includes parts of Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia—was used to the area's heat and humidity. But, as he spoke to the crowd, behind dark glasses, his face

glistened with anger. "It's greed, that's what it is," he said. "It's a damn shame."

The jobs at Mountaire rank as among the most dangerous and worst paid in America. Government statistics indicate that poultry and meat-processing companies report more severe injuries than other industries commonly assumed to be more hazardous, including coal mining and sawmilling. Between 2015 and 2018, on average, a slaughterhouse worker lost a body part, or went to the hospital for in-patient treatment, about every other day. Unlike meatpackers, two-thirds of whom belong to unions, only about a third of poultry workers are represented by organized labor—and those who are unionized face mounting pressure. The industry, which is dominated by large multinational corporations such as Mountaire, has grown increasingly concentrated, expanding its political influence while replacing unionized employees with contract hires, often immigrants or refugees. These vulnerable workers are technically hired by temp agencies, relieving poultry plants of accountability if documentation is lacking. Trump has weakened federal oversight of the industry while accepting millions of dollars in political donations from some of its most powerful figures, including Ronald Cameron, Mountaire's reclusive owner. In 2016, Cameron gave nearly three million dollars to organizations supporting Trump's candidacy.

Founded in Little Rock, Arkansas, but incorporated in Delaware, Mountaire has operations in five states. It reportedly generated more than \$2.3 billion in revenue last year. Because it is owned almost entirely by Cameron—and because it supplies poultry to other companies that put their own labels on the meat—the company's public profile is virtually nonexistent. Cameron himself has received almost no media attention. "I've tried mightily over the

years to bump into him, but he lays low," Max Brantley, a longtime editor at the *Arkansas Times*, told me. According to trade journals, however, Mountaire has been spectacularly successful. *Arkansas Business* reported that the company's sales in 2019 were a billion dollars higher than they were in 2010, nearly doubling the size of the business. Information on profits isn't available, but as Mountaire's revenues have risen wages for poultry workers have fallen even further behind. In 2002, workers were paid twenty-four per cent less than the national average for manufacturing jobs; today, they are paid forty-four per cent less. On average, poultry workers now earn less than fourteen dollars an hour.

By long-standing custom, labor contracts are binding for at least three years, giving a union time to prove its value to members. But in April a laborer at the Selbyville plant, Oscar Cruz Sosa, raised a legal objection to the contract, arguing that he'd been forced to join the union and pay dues against his will. He wanted a vote on whether to decertify the union. Mountaire maintains that it played no role in Cruz Sosa's actions, and that the move to decertify the union was "entirely employee-driven." But Cruz Sosa has had some outside help. His case was supported by lawyers from the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, the foremost anti-union advocacy group, which is funded by undisclosed tax-deductible donations. Meanwhile, a mysterious group calling itself the Oscar Cruz Committee for Employee Rights sent out mailings, in English, supporting Cruz Sosa's complaint. (Cruz Sosa speaks only Spanish.) The return address was the Rehoboth Beach branch of MailBiz, which rents post-office boxes.

Jonathan Williams, a spokesperson for the union, suspects that Cruz Sosa was a stalking horse. "It's not hard to



Ronald Cameron, the head of Mountaire, which critics call a “brutal” employer, is one of Trump’s top donors.

find one individual, who may get special privileges from management, and who maybe is offered a future position,” he told me. “It’s very, very rare, though, when an employee does the research, contacts the Department of Labor, and goes through all this effort. Usually, someone is being coached.” (Cruz Sosa didn’t respond to interview requests.)

When the union reached out to Cruz Sosa, his lawyers filed a grievance with the National Labor Relations Board, claiming harassment. The specific legal dispute is abstruse. Mark Mix, the president of the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, has called the contract’s language “illegal,” claiming that it didn’t make sufficiently clear that—as stipulated by law—new employees had thirty days to decide whether to join the union. The union argues that applications presented to new employees are unambiguous about the time frame, and says that the current contract has virtually the same boilerplate used in every contract with Mountaire since 1982.

After Cruz Sosa got thirty per cent of his co-workers to sign a petition, the National Labor Relations Board ordered an election at the Selbyville plant. When the union protested that this would vi-

olate the customary bar on overturning contracts before three years, the N.L.R.B. decided to broaden the case, reëxamining the entire concept of barring challenges to settled union contracts. The move has shocked labor-law experts. By statute, the N.L.R.B. has five members and is bipartisan, but the Trump Administration has filled only three seats, all with Republicans.

Given the pandemic, the union argued that there was no way an in-person election could be safely and fairly held in Sussex County, where Selbyville is situated. Delaware’s governor had declared a state of emergency on March 23rd, because of the surge in COVID-19 cases, almost half of them in Sussex County, which has many poultry plants. The union asked for a stay, but on June 24th the N.L.R.B. moved to proceed with the election, by mail. The ballots that were sent out must be received by July 14th. Meanwhile, the board will weigh the larger question of whether such elections are legal, potentially overturning a precedent that dates back to the New Deal.

“We’re really being let down by the federal agencies,” Williams, the union spokesperson, said. He also lamented a shift at the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the division of

the Labor Department that enforces workplace safety. Since OSHA’s inception, in 1970, the agency has enforced federal law that makes it illegal to subject employees to “recognized hazards.” But during the pandemic the *Times* editorial board has been prompted to ask, “Why is OSHA AWOL?” Democrats pushed for the agency to issue an emergency rule forcing businesses to comply with the Centers for Disease Control’s health guidelines for COVID-19, but the Labor Department refused.

Instead, on April 28th, forty-eight hours after Tyson Foods, the world’s second-largest meat company, ran a full-page ad in several newspapers warning that “the food supply chain is breaking,” Trump issued an executive order defining slaughterhouse workers as essential. The White House had appointed Cameron to an advisory board on the pandemic’s economic impact. The executive order commanded meat-processing facilities to “continue operations uninterrupted to the extent possible.” The Labor Department released an accompanying statement that all but indemnified companies for exposing workers to COVID-19. It assured employers in essential industries that the agency wouldn’t hold them responsible if they failed to follow the C.D.C.’s health guidelines, as long as they made a “good faith” effort.

Meat and poultry workers had to keep working and risk infection—or lose their jobs. By July 7th, OSHA had received more than six thousand coronavirus-related workplace complaints but had issued only one citation, to a nursing home in Georgia. David Michaels, a professor of public health at George Washington University, who headed OSHA during the Obama Administration, told me that the agency was “saying that the Labor Department would side with the employers if workers sued,” and added, “That would be unthinkable in any other Administration. OSHA’s job isn’t to protect corporations—it’s to protect workers!”

The prospect of food shortages understandably caused concern in the White House. Yet reports show that in April, as Tyson and other producers were warning that “millions of pounds of meat will disappear” from American stores if they had to shut



“Can I get my badge now?”

down, exports of pork to China broke records—and Mountaire’s chicken exports were 3.4 per cent higher than they were a year earlier. The next month, the company’s exports were 10.9 per cent lower than in 2019, but its exports to China and Hong Kong grew by 23.1 per cent in April and by fourteen per cent in May, according to statistics provided by Christopher Rogers, an analyst with Panjiva, which tracks the food-supply chain. Tony Corbo, a lobbyist for Food and Water Watch, a progressive nonprofit advocacy group, said, “They were crying about shortages, and yet we’re still exporting meat. The shortage was phony.”

Meanwhile, coronavirus cases exploded in the meat-and-poultry industry. Initially, Mountaire released statistics about employee infections. At the end of March, the company told the union that there had been forty-one cases in Selbyville. However, Hill’s shop steward, Manuel Rosales, told him not to trust this number. “Half the plant isn’t there,” he explained, either because the workers were sick or because they feared becoming so. A month later, a television station in North Carolina reported that a Mountaire plant, in Siler City, which employs some sixteen hundred workers, had at least seventy-four positive cases among workers and their families. After that, the company stopped sharing its COVID-19 numbers. Mountaire became so secretive, Hill said, that workers “were seeing people disappear, and they didn’t know *what* the hell was going on.” In many cases, a “co-worker had tested positive, but the company wouldn’t tell anyone.” Rosales, who works in the deboning department at the Selbyville plant, told me, “People are coughing and they don’t look well, but they just want to keep the chicken coming. It’s all hush-hush.”

Cathy Bassett, the communications director for Mountaire Farms of Delaware, confirmed, “We’re not releasing any numbers,” adding, “I don’t even know those numbers. We’ve told our workers that if you’ve been exposed we’ll notify you.” According to Hill, the company argued to the union that it was protecting employee privacy. “They were hiding behind it,” Hill told me. “We weren’t asking for private health information—we were just trying to report the numbers.”

Corbo said that, after “the President said these plants had to stay open,” the meat and poultry companies “clammed up.” Trump’s executive order was interpreted as superseding state and local health departments. In a private conversation with the union, Delaware’s governor, John Carney, a Democrat, admitted that he had wanted universal testing in the plants, and had considered ordering them shut, but felt “handcuffed” by Trump’s order. The result has been an extraordinary blackout of public-health information. “I can look online and find the number of COVID-19 cases in nursing homes,” Corbo said. “But not in the poultry industry. If you walk into a poultry plant, you don’t know whether the person next to you has got it. It’s unconscionable.”

The union also maintains that Mountaire charged employees for the protective equipment necessary for them to work safely. The company denies this: Bassett told me that Mountaire has distributed cloth masks to workers, although not N95 masks, and, “where possible,” has erected Plexiglas shields between employees, along with instituting daily body-temperature checks. But Williams, the union spokesperson, sent me a screenshot of a Mountaire paycheck stub that shows deductions for “plant supplies.” Williams said that the supplies in question were “gloves and aprons and such,” adding that deductions like these were illegal. At the rally, Hill protested that, if Mountaire’s owner could afford to give “two or three million dollars—or whatever it was he gave—to Trump, they shouldn’t be stealing money from workers’ paychecks.” Noting that Cameron is “Trump’s buddy,” Hill added, “I guess they feel like they can do whatever they want.”

The union’s struggles with the Labor Department are part of a much larger reversal of federal protections for workers, consumers, and the environment under Trump. In 2016, the President promised to “dismantle the regulatory state,” as Stephen Bannon, his former White House strategist, often put it. Given the complexities of fed-

eral rulemaking, this proved somewhat difficult in the first three years of the Administration. But the pandemic has offered Trump an opportunity: now that he can invoke an economic emergency, he can relax, rescind, or suspend federal regulations by fiat. In May and June, Trump issued a pair of executive orders directing national agencies to

ignore federal regulations and environmental laws if they burdened the economy—again, in many instances, the companies were told that they just had to act “in good faith.” As the *Times* and the *Washington Post* have reported, these moves have weakened regulations on all kinds of businesses, from trucking

companies to oil and gas pipelines. In Corbo’s view, many in the media have missed one of the biggest aspects of the COVID-19 story. “Everyone is looking at the shiny object—the pandemic,” he said. “Meanwhile, the government is deregulating *everything*. It’s unreal.”

In April, for instance, the United States Department of Agriculture granted fifteen waivers to poultry plants, including a Mountaire facility in North Carolina, authorizing them to increase the number of birds per minute—or B.P.M.—that workers must process. The waivers enabled companies to accelerate the pace from a hundred and forty B.P.M. to a hundred and seventy-five. Angela Stuesse, an anthropologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who has studied the poultry industry, told me that, in the chicken business, “you make pennies on a pound.” Among the few ways to increase profits are squeezing labor costs and accelerating line speeds, which are set by the U.S.D.A. to accommodate federal inspectors, who are supposed to assess every bird. The regulations have long been a point of contention between poultry-plant owners and unions, because as the line speed increases so do injuries and other stresses on workers’ bodies. “They move the birds so fast, you have to be really close together to get every bird,” Williams, the union spokesperson, told me. “It’s like the ‘I Love Lucy’ episode at the chocolate factory.” Even though the C.D.C. has





emphasized that social distancing is necessary to maintain safety, faster production lines require more workers, who must then squeeze closer together. In many areas of a plant, poultry workers already stand two feet apart at most, often facing one another. Nonetheless, the U.S.D.A. has now indicated that it plans to permit faster line speeds throughout the poultry industry. The National Chicken Council, the industry's trade group, had lobbied for precisely this change. Williams fears that "these policies will result in the deaths of many more workers."

Debbie Berkowitz, a program director at the National Employment Law Project, a pro-labor group, who previously headed the health-and-safety division of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, told me that, thanks to the pandemic, "the Chamber of Commerce is getting everything they always wanted." An analysis of public records by her group found that, of the fifteen poultry plants granted waivers to increase line speeds in April, eight had COVID-19 outbreaks at the time. "If you're a worker in a plant bursting with COVID-19, it's a shitshow for you," Berkowitz said. "The industry is getting away with murdering people."

Michaels, the former OSHA head, told me, "We're very much back in Upton Sinclair's 'The Jungle'—the

1906 novel that exposed abuses in the meat industry. The book so shocked Americans that President Theodore Roosevelt ordered an immediate investigation of slaughterhouses. The result was landmark consumer-protection legislation that formed the foundation of today's Food and Drug Administration. But, for the past four decades, wealthy donors to the Republican Party have pushed hard for the dismantling of Progressive Era reforms and later curbs on corporate power. The 1980 platform of the Libertarian Party, which was underwritten by the billionaire conservative donors Charles and David Koch, laid out a road map, calling for the abolition of almost every federal agency, including the F.D.A. Although Trump claims to be a defender of the working class, he has delighted wealthy donors—and their pressure groups, such as the Club for Growth—by reliably serving their agenda. Michaels told me, "Mountaire and others are taking advantage of the COVID-19 crisis to say, 'We need more chickens.' The Trump Administration is aiding and abetting this. They're saying, 'Produce more food,' regardless of the cost to workers. If companies cared as much about their workers as they do about their chickens, we'd be a better country."

The union rally in Delaware wrapped up with a surprisingly impassioned endorsement from Chris Coons—ordi-

narily a moderate in the Senate and a booster of the state's poultry industry. Coons, who studied at Yale's divinity school while getting a law degree there, later told me that supporting the union had become a moral imperative. Addressing the rally, he explained that the labor showdown had brought to a head three crises: "We've got a pandemic that's already taken more than a hundred and twenty thousand American lives. We've got a recession that's already knocked forty million people out of work. And we've got a nation where millions of people have taken to the streets in the month after George Floyd was murdered by a police officer." Coons concluded, "All three of those come together in this moment, in this vote tomorrow, because the plants of the Delaware poultry industry only work because of Black and brown workers, and they only have safe conditions because of organized labor."

As the temperature in the parking lot climbed into the nineties, the rally dispersed. The participants drove in a convoy to the Selbyville plant, in a show of support for the upcoming vote. The facility is a hulking mass of industrial tanks and largely windowless buildings crisscrossed by a maze of metal pipes and ventilation shafts. Surrounded by concrete barriers and chain-link fences, the complex has the feel of a prison.

A few miles away, at the Oasis truck stop, I met with an employee from the Selbyville plant. A feisty mother with three kids still at home, she explained, with a laugh, that she had put on her "Tina Turner wig" for the occasion.

She had worked in Mountaire's chicken plant, off and on, for years, after attending a local high school. Although she and her co-workers had felt frightened as more and more colleagues disappeared after contracting COVID-19, she was grateful to the pandemic for one thing. "I've wanted to speak out for so long—I thank God that this pandemic happened, so that my voice can be heard," she told me. "It's terrible in there. I want these people exposed."

She asked to speak anonymously, because she feared retribution both from Mountaire and from local racists, who, she said, seemed more aggressive re-

cently toward African-Americans like her; when out shopping, she had noticed more Confederate-flag paraphernalia on public display. But she was eager to describe working conditions so exploitative that, as she put it, “it’s slavery, baby.”

Typically, her shift begins at 8:18 A.M. and lasts until 4:54 P.M. Since her youngest child is still a toddler, she works less than full time. As a result, she has lost her seniority, and gets only one week of vacation a year; workers don’t get two weeks until they’ve been employed for four full years. “You know what they give us for Christmas?” she said. “You think I *ever* got a bonus since working there? They give us two whole chickens and a bag of potatoes. Every year, that’s all we get.” She was paid about thirteen dollars an hour until the pandemic hit. Mountaire then instituted a hazard-pay raise of a dollar an hour, but in June the raise was cancelled. Even local convenience stores, she noted, gave workers a three-dollar-an-hour raise. “And then Mountaire took it back!” she said, shaking her head. “Why are they giving us a one-dollar raise and giving two *million* dollars to Donald Trump? What are we, animals?”

She works in the refrigerated side of the plant, handling eviscerated carcasses. The temperature, she said, is so cold that “it’s unbearable.” Although she is under fifty, she said that she already has arthritis. “Listen, girl,” she said. “My body *hurts* from that place. My hands. The cold air. Imagine you got to put your hands on that cold meat. I mean, sometimes it’s so cold I have to go home.”

She and other workers complained that, even before the coronavirus struck, their respiratory systems had suffered from inhaling harsh antimicrobial chemicals, such as peracetic acid, that are used to protect chicken from contamination. When she walks through some parts of the plant, “I hold my breath,” she told me.

When the pandemic hit, she said, “a lot of people died.” She wasn’t sure how many fatalities there had been, because her bosses were “not talking about it.” One co-worker she considered a friend—an elderly man named Hyung Lee, who was known as Pop Pop—disappeared. “Everything was hush-hush,”

she said. “It was just ‘Go in there and do your work.’” Eventually, Lee’s son called to say that Lee had died from pneumonia brought on by COVID-19, and that Lee’s wife was now “fighting for her life.”

The employee said of Lee, “God, it took him out. I’m hurt. I cried my ass off.” But management was silent. “You think the owner cares about people dying in that hell?” she said. “No! You think they posted *one picture* of a person who died, in memory of somebody? Nothing. Not one picture.” A co-worker confirmed this account and added, “They didn’t even take up a collection for the family.”

Soon afterward, the employee said, she warned her supervisor that another friend at the plant, an émigré from Guatemala, seemed sick. The supervisor sent the woman to see the company nurse. The employee told me, “The nurse sent her right back on the God-damned line to work. The nurses aren’t worth shit in there.”

The Guatemalan woman eventually stopped showing up for work. One day, one of her four sons called and said that his mother was sick with COVID-19 and

was on a ventilator. “That woman worked *right by* me!” the employee told me. “I prayed for her.” The Guatemalan woman recovered, but vowed not to return to Mountaire. The employee told me, “It’s an evil company.”

According to the *Washington Post*, in April and May at least twenty-two hundred poultry workers on the Delmarva Peninsula contracted COVID-19, and at least seventeen died. Delaware health officials began testing workers outside poultry plants, and at one plant thirty per cent of the results were positive. The paper reported that one infected Mountaire worker, in an effort to protect her family, tried to quarantine herself for two weeks in a windowless bathroom, sleeping on a foam mat. After the company provided two weeks of partial sick pay, it paid her nothing during the additional month it took her to recover. At the Oasis truck stop, the employee said of Mountaire, “They have all these signs that say stuff like ‘In God We Trust.’ But how, in a pandemic, can you treat people like this?”

Bassett, the Mountaire spokesperson, said, “This has really been a challenge for everyone. We tried to follow



“Oh, good! You’re moving out!”

the C.D.C. guidelines, but they changed.” At first, the C.D.C. had advised that anybody exposed to the virus should quarantine for two weeks. But, Bassett said, “at some point the C.D.C. realized essential workers were being sent home for fourteen days.” Williams alleges that the C.D.C. rolled back its recommendation “after interventions from lobbyists and Trump.” As Bassett acknowledges, employees were henceforth permitted to quarantine only “if they were symptomatic.”

In a filing to the N.L.R.B., Mountaire conceded that it did not conduct its first plant-wide testing in Selbyville until May 27th. Thirty-four workers, it says, tested positive, and none were symptomatic—underlining the inadequacy of sending home only people with symptoms. Another surge appears to be coming: in late June, word spread through the Selbyville plant that fifteen more workers had been sent home because of the virus.

Bassett emphasized that, when the pandemic hit, Mountaire began offering paid sick leave even to contract workers, who ordinarily got none. The company also temporarily suspended a point system, detested by employees, that penalized them for missing work. “Managers in our plants have good relationships with our workers,” Bassett said, adding, “We are blessed, because there is medical care on the premises.”

The employee I met at the truck stop scoffed at this notion. She said that Mountaire had offered workers just five days of paid sick leave, and only at sixty per cent of their regular pay. Sick employees, she noted, couldn’t afford to stay home on such reduced wages: “People have to feed their families.” She paused. “It’s miserable,” she said. “The struggle’s real, but I’m thankful for what I’ve got. I wish I could have a whole lot more. But I’m thankful.”

She and her husband, who is self-employed, can’t afford the health-care plan offered by Mountaire. They rely on Medicaid, and on food stamps. Moreover, the quality of the company’s on-site medical care, she said, is poor—an opinion validated by OSHA, which, in December, 2016, levied a forty-thousand-dollar fine against Mountaire, which was partly for medical mismanagement. (Mountaire contested the

THE FIELD

Two people are asleep in a field.

The light is not yet up. The air is cold, even though it is summer.

I cannot get closer than where I am. I know only so much about them. I know they are not dead.

I know they are asleep because one of them has moved, just enough to show it is a movement you make in sleep, an adjustment of resting weight. I don’t know if it is romantic that they are in this field. Or if it is drunkenness or despair.

From this distance their clothes are black.

They are two men, or a man and a woman,

or two women. I am not near enough to learn what their bodies are, or how proximate or distant from each other.

It is the corner of my eye that has seen them,

walking quickly past. It is a corner of my mind that has seen them, a startled glance, then that glance widening.

They have no belongings, no things that speak of displacement.

The field is askew with untended grass, except where they have flattened it. Have they been here the full length of the night, or just the previous hour?

Who are they for whom the grass is a bed? Who are those others, elsewhere, sleeping in the open back of a truck,

citations but eventually settled.) OSHA launched an inspection of the company after the tip of a worker’s thumb was amputated. A second employee, it emerged, had also injured a thumb, and had asked to visit an emergency room; the doctor provided by the company’s health plan sent him back to work. A week later, a hospital X-ray revealed an open fracture.

At the time, Mountaire had a licensed practical nurse offering first aid, in what the company calls its “medical department.” The nurse had claimed to be making treatment decisions under the direction of a local doctor. But, when OSHA inspectors contacted the doctor, he said that he didn’t work for the company, and had never set foot in the plant. “There was no clinical oversight,” Kathleen Fagan, a retired physician with OSHA’s medical unit, told me, after reviewing an internal report. The nurse’s responsibility included keeping a log of worker injuries, as required by federal law, but OSHA found that workers were discouraged from complaining, and were unfairly accused of lying about health problems—likely in an effort by the company to avoid reporting injuries.

At the Oasis truck stop, the Mount-

aire employee told me that she was “praying for Local 27.” She suspected that the company wanted to replace the union employees with contract workers, many of whom, she said, were “illegal, temp-agency” hires who came from other countries. She understood why such immigrants took the jobs, but the terms of employment were “highway robbery.” She said, “Mountaire gives them less—no sick pay, no vacation. They can terminate you. *That’s* what they want.”

Before the employee drove off, she noted, “I’ve never seen the owner, long as I’ve been working at that company. I don’t even know the owner’s name. I just know that Little Rock is where the big headquarters is.” She said she’d heard that the owner was “doing business with Donald Trump.” She had a question: “How rich is Mountaire? They’re rich, aren’t they?”

The house in Little Rock where Ronald Cameron grew up was perched high on the best street in town, Edgehill Road. The road was dyed pink—nobody recalls why—but it might as well have been painted gold. The Cameron family, who owned an animal-feed business, had a house with two-story

or on the ground behind a guarded fence?
 I am walking in the countryside, so maybe they are people of myth.
 Or they are people of a labor I know nothing about.
 There are birds singing to the dawn. There is the sound
 of a big wheel rolling somewhere. There are trees,
 as tall as parents, but they have not slept under them.
 In the dark, alone, I went out to see the turn toward morning.
 Then I saw them. What the imagination would do with two people
 sleeping in a field is keep them where they are,
 unknowable, untouched. The imagination also wants them
 to stir, to wake them back into their stories.
 The day will be hot. The smell of yesterday's heat
 is still in the air, like the sweat of a body. What would bring me
 to a field in the night and have me sleep there?
 Whose hand would I be holding, out of desire or fear?
 My pants' hems are heavy with dew. I know how far away
 I am from everyone. Am I a child again, am I old?
 Or am I only who I am now, astounded at the transport of the body
 from one end of time to another.

—Rick Barot

pillars out front, and a porte cochère over which two Black servants lived. One was the cook, Lucille, who delighted the four Cameron children with her homemade chocolate pies; her brother, Robert, worked as the butler. When the Camerons spent summer weekends at a lake house, in Hot Springs, Lucille and Robert often accompanied them. A family friend remembers her squeezing fresh orange juice for breakfast, “just spoiling us.”

Ronnie Cameron, as he is still known today, was born in 1945, and was his parents' only son. His sister Amanda, who is five years older, told me, “My father was a very generous man. He always made sure I had everything. But the minute my brother was born—it was the South, he was the son—he was raised, reinforced, and groomed better. It was hard for me.” She said of her brother, “He was almost worshipped. He was raised to be the prince.”

The feed company, which later became Mountaire, had been founded in Arkansas in 1914 by Ronnie's grandfather, Guy Cameron. Guy's son, G. Ted Cameron, who took over in 1948, began not just supplying but also buying up chicken farms.

By the time her father was running

the firm, Amanda said, many of the workers were Black. She says that her father taught his children to show respect to everyone, but she acknowledges that racism was prevalent. In 1957, the governor of Arkansas deployed the National Guard to Little Rock, in an attempt to block nine Black students from integrating Little Rock Central High School. That year, Amanda's parents sent her to a new public high school on the wealthier side of town. Amanda recalls the choral instructor teaching that “Black people could never pronounce the English language properly, because of the construction of their mouths.” At the time, this didn't faze her: “I was a typical convertible-driving, self-centered debutante, whizzing through life.” It wasn't until she read James Baldwin, and married and moved away, that she realized how bigoted her upbringing had been and rebelled against the family.

After living in San Francisco, divorcing, and growing disenchanted with the counterculture, Amanda returned to her family's conservative roots. She said of her brother, “We have a horrible relationship, but I love him.” She added, “I support Trump, and am thrilled my brother is doing what he's doing.” Trump,

she believes, is the only thing standing between America and communism.

Ronnie Cameron followed a more conventional path. Blond, handsome, and well mannered, he left a good impression on schoolmates, but he, too, had a defiant streak. According to one of his best friends in high school, Bobby Duffy, who later became the culture editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Cameron was given a Ford Falcon at a young age, and was a “very reckless driver.” Duffy said, “It was white knuckles all the way—and if you told him to slow down he'd go even faster. Just like Trump, when challenged he'd double down.”

Cameron's father was a Republican, and by the time Ronnie enrolled in college, at the University of Arkansas, he was one, too. Patrick Hays, who joined the same fraternity as Cameron a few years later, eventually became the mayor of North Little Rock; he recalls Cameron telling him that he was the only Democrat to whom he'd contribute, because the mayor dealt with mundane issues, such as collecting garbage. The Cameron family was firmly anti-union, a sentiment that was evident in a telegram that Ronnie's father sent to President Lyndon Johnson in 1968—the year that Ronnie joined the family business. In the telegram, his father asked the President to intervene in a railroad strike, warning that it could ruin the Arkansas poultry industry. The strike, which lasted for five days, was settled the day after the telegram was sent, but the battle lines were drawn.

Arkansas had an ugly, racist history with organized labor. In 1944, legislators had proposed a so-called “right to work” amendment to the state constitution, which would prohibit making union membership or paying union dues a condition of employment. The Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation had pushed for the change, in alliance with a group calling itself the Christian American Association, which warned that unless the amendment passed “white women and white men will be forced into organizations with black African apes . . . whom they will have to call ‘brother’ or lose their jobs.” A similar drive in California failed that year, but in Arkansas, where Jim Crow laws and other forms of voting-rights

discrimination disenfranchised many Black citizens, the amendment passed, insuring that poultry workers, and other low-wage workers, would have little bargaining power. North Carolina, where Mountaire has two poultry-processing plants, is also a right-to-work state; Selbyville is the only location where the company has a slaughter plant at which workers have organized.

Mountaire prospered under Ted Cameron, but Amanda told me that he was an alcoholic, which “was hard on everyone, but especially Ronnie.” In 1978, five years after Ronnie succeeded his father as president, Ted was found dead, in his swimming pool. “Either a person succumbs to those hard family things or rises,” Amanda told me. “I think it made Ronnie a more private person.” She added, “Ronnie’s a tough cookie. He’s seen weaknesses in people, and just toughened up.”

Pratt Remmel, who grew up down the street from the Camerons, recalls Amanda telling him bitterly, as an adult, that her brother “was in control of the family money.” She told me that it had been her choice “not to be part of it anymore.” Yet, she added, “the company was *given* to Ronnie.” The division of Mountaire’s shares isn’t public, and messages to its corporate headquarters went

unanswered. A. Larry Ross, who is a spokesperson for evangelical leaders, and who travels in Ronnie Cameron’s social circle, forwarded my request for an interview, but there was no reply. A well-informed source said that, in the past, Cameron had held at least sixty-nine per cent of Mountaire’s shares. The company’s other shareholders are believed to include a few top executives and family members. Cameron’s son-in-law Kevin Garland is Mountaire’s C.E.O.

Cameron has been married three times. According to Amanda, his first marriage, which started when he was quite young, didn’t last long. He then married a former Breck Girl model, Sherrill Heerwagen. Duffy told me that Heerwagen, with whom Cameron had two children, learned that he was divorcing her only after her mother-in-law read about it in the local paper. (Heerwagen died in 2018.) Cameron’s current wife, Nina, is the daughter of a fundamentalist preacher and, according to Amanda, is “very Biblically based.” Nina once appeared on a Christian program, describing her effort to convert an anti-religious patient in a nursing home. After Nina sensed a “prompting of the Holy Spirit,” she flew the woman’s son in to visit, and it melted the woman’s resistance to read-

ing the Bible. “She was seeing Christ in me,” Nina said. Cameron was raised an Episcopalian, but he and his wife now attend one of Little Rock’s biggest evangelical churches, Fellowship Bible. A hub of social conservatism, it lists condemnation of homosexuality as among its key beliefs, stating on its Web site that “Adam and Eve were made to complement each other in a one-flesh union that establishes the only normative pattern of sexual relations for men and women.”

Six years ago, Duffy told me, he ran into Cameron at a memorial service. They hadn’t seen each other in years, but, because they had been close in school, Duffy felt that he could speak openly about his life. “You know I’m gay, don’t you?” he said.

“Yes,” Cameron replied. “And I also know you’re going to Hell.” He turned his back and walked away.

“I was stunned,” Duffy told me. “I think he became very devout, and then, at some point, the devotion went to the right.”

Mountaire’s official creed says, “Good stewards of all the assets that God has entrusted to us.” Cameron increasingly began using his share of the company’s assets to influence American policy and politics by funding socially conservative and business-friendly candidates and advocacy groups. Low-level poultry workers have been described as cogs in a perpetual-motion machine, but big-donor politics can also be a kind of perpetual-motion machine—one that recycles profits to perpetuate profits.

By 2001, Cameron had extended his sphere of influence beyond Arkansas by becoming a director of one of the Washington area’s most secretive and best-connected religious organizations: the Fellowship Foundation, also known as the Family. Its public face is as the presenter of the annual National Prayer Breakfast, but it has also courted influential converts by offering dormitory-like housing for members of Congress in a mansion near the Capitol, and by hosting prayer sessions for V.I.P.s at another mansion, in northern Virginia. The Fellowship Foundation has purported to be politically neutral, but it was launched, in 1935, by a Seattle min-



*“If I’m going to be your knight in shining armor,
somebody’s got to polish it.”*

ister, Abraham Vereide, who viewed the historic labor strikes spreading across the West Coast that year as satanic. At prayer breakfasts, Vereide helped mobilize powerful business leaders to crush the insurrection.

Defenders of the Fellowship Foundation argue that it does good by disseminating the teachings of Christ to those in a position to make a difference. But critics such as Jeff Sharlet, a journalist who has written two books about the group, see its blurring of church and state as a threat to democracy. Cameron has long been a major funder of the group, typifying what Sharlet sees as its conflation of big business and Christian nationalism. After Cameron, in 2009, retired from the board, another Mountaire executive, W. Dabbs Cavin, became the group's president, serving until 2016.

"It's like the Dead Poets Society—a club no one knows about that is vital to its participants," Eric Williams, the senior pastor of North Congregational United Church of Christ, in Columbus, Ohio, told me. A group that he led, Clergy Voice, has questioned the Fellowship Foundation's authenticity as a faith-based organization. "It's an old boys' club," he told me. "They think God favors the powerful, and that Jesus came as a leader of the rich and powerful, not of the powerless." He added, "They should just own up to what they are—the American Religion of Autocratic Capitalism."

Hays, the former North Little Rock mayor, recalls that Cameron once flew him to Washington, in a private jet, for the National Prayer Breakfast. "Ronnie's got a strong religious affiliation, certainly—he's a man of principle," he said. But his conservative views, Hays speculates, are also driven by his corporate interests: "He's business-oriented. It's about free enterprise, reductions of regulations."

For tax purposes, the Fellowship Foundation must skirt politics. But it has repeatedly stirred political controversy by cozying up to members of Congress and by forming ties with anti-democratic world leaders, including a Ugandan official who promoted the death penalty for homosexuality. In 2015, the Center for Responsive Politics revealed that the group had paid



"I am not now, nor will I ever be, bored enough for pinochle."

for the international travel of a congressman and his wife, and that Cavin, the Mountaire executive serving as the Fellowship Foundation's president at the time, had signed the expense forms. The congressman, Robert Aderholt, a Republican from Alabama, insisted that the travel had been strictly religious in purpose, but the payment provoked criticism because Aderholt was the chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, which has substantial influence over poultry policy. In an interview with the Web site OpenSecrets, Meredith McGehee, then the director of the Campaign Legal Center, asked whether the Fellowship Foundation had been used "as a conduit for a poultry company."

In 2016, Cameron reportedly discussed taking over the Fellowship Foundation. But some participants are wary of him, seeing him as an overbearing, hyperpartisan Trump supporter who is politicizing the group. Cameron's business practices should also be of concern,

according to Warren Throckmorton, an evangelical Christian and a psychology professor at Grove City College, in Pennsylvania, who has written about the Fellowship Foundation for *Christianity Today*. He said, "It matters how he treats his workers, because he's making money off the backs of these people and is donating it to Christian causes—so there's a moral connection."

Cameron's political activities extend well beyond the Fellowship Foundation. In 2004, he set up a private foundation, the Jesus Fund. Given the poverty of many Mountaire workers, the size of the fund is striking: according to the most recently available federal tax statement, the book value of the Jesus Fund's assets in 2018 was three hundred and twenty-seven million dollars. The sole donors were Cameron and his company.

The gulf between Cameron's spectacular wealth and his workers' meagre circumstances echoes the findings of a



recent study by two Harvard economists, Anna Stansbury and Lawrence H. Summers, the former economic adviser to President Bill Clinton and President Barack Obama. In the paper, “The Declining Worker Power Hypothesis,” Stansbury and Summers argue that, in the past four decades, the single largest driver of income inequality in America has been the decline in worker power, much of it stemming from the collapse of membership in private-sector unions. Since the fifties, the percentage of private-sector workers who belong to unions has declined from thirty-three per cent to six per cent. As a result, there has been an upward redistribution of income to high-income executives, owners, and shareholders. The economists argue that this decline in worker power, more than any other structural change in the economy, accounts for nearly all the gains in the share of income made by America’s wealthiest one per cent.

An outgrowth of this trend is the accumulation of enormous wealth and political influence by private foundations. The Jesus Fund has the same

address as Cameron’s corporate office, in Little Rock, Arkansas, and shares the same phone number. A Mountaire administrative assistant who works in Cameron’s office also answers the phone for the Jesus Fund. (Calls to the number were not returned.) I.R.S. filings name Cameron and a former Mountaire employee as the fund’s sole trustees. The fund sometimes makes relatively small grants to secular charities—in 2015, it gave five thousand dollars to the Arkansas Hospice Foundation—but it contributes overwhelmingly to conservative Christian groups. In 2018, its only grant was an eighteen-million-dollar donation to the National Christian Foundation, in support of unidentified “organizations that esteem traditional, Scripture-based values for government.” Cameron’s fund could have donated to such organizations directly, but this approach kept the ultimate recipients of its money from public view. The N.C.F. is a “donor-advised fund,” and such groups redistribute charitable donations from various sources to many causes, acting

as a middleman in a way that erases the fingerprints from any one gift. Donor-advised funds have become increasingly controversial, in part because they impede transparency. The N.C.F. has been ranked as America’s eighth-largest charity, and in 2018 it redistributed \$1.7 billion in grants to some twenty-six thousand organizations, ranging from the Boy Scouts to the Federalist Society. According to *Inside Philanthropy*, the N.C.F. has probably become the single largest funder of the anti-abortion movement. It is, for instance, a huge source of funding for the Alliance Defending Freedom, a group that facilitates lawsuits aiming to curb abortion and L.G.B.T.Q. rights, and also supports limiting insurance coverage for contraceptives—a position that the Supreme Court sided with in early July. The N.C.F. has supported twenty-three organizations that the Southern Poverty Law Center defines as hate groups, including the Alliance Defending Freedom.

In recent years, Cameron has also used his fortune to influence electoral politics. In a 2011 speech, Charles Koch praised him for being among a select group of backers who had given a million dollars or more to the Koch brothers’ political war chest, which became known as Freedom Partners. The next year, Freedom Partners gave a million dollars to the National Right to Work Committee, whose head, Mark Mix, had spoken at a Koch private-donor summit in 2010. In an illustration of how such contributions serve donors’ interests, Mix’s organization went on to represent Cruz Sosa, the Mountaire employee who is currently challenging the union.

By 2014, Cameron’s name was appearing on lists of the nation’s largest campaign contributors. He and his company spent \$4.8 million on Republican candidates and groups that year. He was the biggest corporate donor to the Freedom Partners Action Fund, a Koch political-action committee. When Mountaire gave three million dollars to it, Cameron told Politico that it was “time to stand up and put my money where my mouth is.” He said that he worried about attracting publicity—“I work very hard to keep my name out of stuff”—but noted that he was even

more worried about the possibility “that my grandkids could be living under Communism.” He told Bloomberg News that “Obamacare is a disaster,” characterizing it as an effort “to take over all of the private health-care services.” That year in Arkansas, Cameron heavily supported the successful Senate campaign of Tom Cotton, the arch-conservative former Army officer. And, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, Cameron helped Republicans get around campaign-finance restrictions in Maryland, where Larry Hogan, the Republican candidate for governor, appeared to be in trouble. The State of Maryland limits direct campaign contributions to candidates. The Republican Governors Association, which can spend as much as it wants, asked Mountaire for money. Late in the race, the company donated a quarter of a million dollars. The R.G.A. claims that it didn’t solicit the funds specifically for Maryland, but it went on to spend lavishly there. Hogan won, and on his inauguration day he blocked a proposal opposed by the poultry industry.

In 2016, Cameron made even bigger political contributions. After giving three million dollars in support of Mike Huckabee’s Presidential campaign—its largest donation—he gave two million dollars to Rebuilding America Now, a pro-Trump super PAC. He and Nina contributed an additional \$893,400 to Trump’s joint fund-raising committee. In the 2018 midterm elections, Cameron topped himself again; he and his company gave more than \$7.7 million to Republican candidates, campaigns, and groups. His biggest gift went to a Koch-related organization pouring contributions directly into House and Senate campaigns. Cameron’s cash didn’t save the Republicans from big losses, but it did win him an invitation to an Election Night party with Trump at the White House, where guests were reportedly offered hot dogs and hamburgers, but no chicken.

This year, Cameron and the Koch network have reportedly been at odds, because Charles Koch, a libertarian, has declined to back Trump, whose leadership he has criticized. The network is expected to spend heavily in support of Republican House and Senate candidates but to stay out of the Presidential

race, as it did in 2016. Cameron, who remains a strong Trump supporter, reportedly objected to the decision. He and Mountaire have already donated more than a million dollars in support of Trump’s reelection, and about five million dollars to Republican candidates and electoral groups.

Before the 2016 elections, according to a well-informed source, members of Mountaire’s executive committee met. They complained that the Obama Administration had too many regulations—and discussed how much better it would be for the business if a Republican were President. It appears that Cameron’s bet on Trump has paid off.

Mountaire’s Web site says that it is now the sixth-largest poultry company in America. By 2019, thanks in part to lax antitrust enforcement in recent decades, the ten largest poultry companies controlled an estimated eighty per cent of the chicken market. Two current lawsuits question whether those gains were achieved entirely legally. A sweeping class-action suit representing chicken workers alleges that fourteen of the largest poultry companies, including Mountaire, illegally conspired to hold down the workers’ wages. And a suit filed by Maplevale Farms, which supplies food to restaurants, accuses many of the same poultry companies, including Mountaire, of having conspired since 2008 to fix chicken prices. Last year, the Justice Department halted



the discovery process in the price-fixing suit so that it could launch its own investigation into the matter—raising the prospect of criminal charges. In both cases, the companies have denied the allegations.

Williams, the union spokesperson, called Mountaire’s culture particularly “brutal.” In 2010, the company settled a lawsuit in which it was accused of racial discrimination and retaliation. Three years later, it settled a class-action

suit accusing it of charging workers for necessary protective clothing and of failing to pay them for the time spent putting it on; Mountaire denied the allegations but agreed to pay about eight million dollars. The same year, the company paid a fine of nearly fifty thousand dollars to resolve a retaliation case brought by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. At a Mountaire poultry plant in North Carolina, supervisors had allegedly discriminated against Haitian workers, denying them bathroom breaks, throwing chicken parts at them, and then firing a translator for complaining about this behavior.

Between 2010 and 2016, Mountaire had twice the number of OSHA violations per thousand workers as Tyson—a company with a workforce twelve times bigger. Since 2001, Mountaire has been responsible for a series of environmental and workplace violations in Delaware. The company currently stands accused of letting chicken-plant waste pollute the well water of at least eight hundred residents living near its plant in Millsboro, Delaware. Mountaire and state authorities reached a tentative settlement agreement, but the court hasn’t yet accepted it, and lawyers representing some of the affected residents are pursuing a class-action suit.

George Farah, a lawyer representing the poultry workers who are accusing Mountaire of fixing wages, told me that “it’s remarkable that someone committed to Christianity” would run a company the way Cameron has. “I think Jesus would have wanted the workers at Mountaire to be compensated more effectively and treated with more dignity,” Farah added. “But there’s a history in the poultry world where, every time a voice has stood up for the workers, they’ve been displaced by an even more vulnerable group.”

At the Oasis truck stop, the Mountaire employee expressed disgust that, in the middle of a pandemic, she might be replaced by someone paid even worse—a worker who had likely come from a foreign land to seek opportunity. “I’m telling you, Donald Trump wants to make this a Third World country,” she said. “Treat them like slave dogs. They come to the Land of the Free—but, honey, it isn’t free anymore.” ♦

DOLLAR FOR DOLLAR

How the financier Steven Mnuchin gained control of America's money machine.

BY SHEELAH KOLHATKAR

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin became concerned about the novel coronavirus toward the end of January, while attending the annual World Economic Forum, in Davos, Switzerland. COVID-19 was spreading rapidly in China, and authorities had closed off Wuhan, the city where the outbreak started. The theme at Davos was sustainability, but Mnuchin was surprised that no one was talking about the eleven million people under lockdown. “I was at a C.E.O. dinner, and I actually brought it up,” he recalled recently. “But, at the time I raised this as a risk, I did not see it travelling around the world.”

On January 31st, the Trump Administration announced that it would limit flights from China but did not implement either widespread contact tracing or testing for the coronavirus. (Many early cases of COVID-19 were later shown to have come into the U.S. from Europe.) In the following weeks, as Iran and Italy were overwhelmed by outbreaks, President Donald Trump continued to hold campaign rallies and accused Democrats of “politicizing the coronavirus,” which he said could disappear “like a miracle.” In press briefings, he and Administration officials insisted that they were “totally prepared,” and assured the public that the risk of infection was low. Government health experts, led by Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, tried to persuade Trump to focus on COVID-19. At the end of February, when Nancy Messonnier, of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, warned the public of its seriousness, Trump sidelined her.

I spoke with Mnuchin several times, by phone from Washington, starting in late May. In early June, he told me that, before the coronavirus outbreak, the possibility of a global pandemic “was not a risk that was on my radar screen.”

He did not criticize Trump’s handling of the crisis, and was quick to deflect any blame. “I don’t think it’s fair to say in any way that the Administration should have been better prepared. I mean, if anything, this issue is no different now than it was four years ago, or eight years ago, or twelve years ago,” he said. “This goes back to prior Administrations—I think the country should have had better stockpiles of critical items.”

Previous Treasury Secretaries, such as Timothy Geithner and Henry Paulson, had deep experience and public profiles before moving to Washington. Mnuchin came to the role, in 2017, with different credentials. A Wall Street financier with a background in bond trading and bank management, he has known Trump for seventeen years, and was an investor in two of his real-estate developments, in the mid-two-thousands. Mnuchin has business relationships with some of the wealthiest people in the country—likely part of the reason that Trump asked him to join his Presidential campaign as its fund-raising chief.

Mnuchin, who is fifty-seven, is one of the few original Cabinet members remaining in the Administration. He has developed a reputation for unflinching loyalty. In August, 2017, after Trump suggested that there were “fine people” among the crowds of neo-Nazis and other hate groups at a rally in Charlottesville, Mnuchin declared that, in fact, Trump “in no way, shape, or form” had defended white supremacists. That September, he supported Trump’s attack on the N.F.L. players who knelt during the national anthem to protest racial oppression, saying, “They can do free speech on their own time.” Mnuchin has fended off congressional Democrats seeking Trump’s tax returns, and, in June, he denounced the former national-security adviser John Bolton for his scathing memoir about the President, saying that Bolton had put “self-pro-

motion ahead of the truth and of the interests of the country.” In the book, Bolton claims that, under Mnuchin, the Treasury Department had resisted or weakened sanctions on foreign adversaries, including Iran, Russia, and Venezuela. Mnuchin told me that the Treasury Department had “done more sanctions in the last three years than any of the previous Administrations combined.”

Mnuchin’s fealty serves as a kind of job insurance. “He’s almost part of the family,” a former Administration official told me. “It gives Mnuchin a lot more face time and an inside track. I think it’s fair to say that the President is closer personally and socially to Mnuchin than to anyone else in the Cabinet.” Mnuchin does not like to go into detail about his relationship with Trump, but he told me that he and the President were almost completely aligned. “Of course, on any specific policy there may be times where I give the President my views—and, again, I respect that he’s the President,” he said. “But, in terms of his fundamental positions, I have a great appreciation of them.”

Straight-backed and inscrutable, with a pale complexion and ink-black hair, Mnuchin speaks with a breezy, imperious tone while managing to appear ill at ease in almost any situation. He is often described by those who have worked with him as a pragmatist whose interest lies in searching out opportunities, brokering deals, and reaping the rewards. “He is not an ideological warrior,” another former Administration official told me. “Some of that comes from working with people in the investment community—they generally don’t get overly wedded to certain situations. They’re in it to make the transaction, and then they move on.” Many fiscal conservatives and libertarians point to Ayn Rand and her philosophy of objectivism as an ideological grounding. When I asked Mnuchin about



Mnuchin's fealty serves as a kind of job insurance. "He's almost part of the family," a former Administration official said.

Rand's famous novel "The Fountainhead," which he said he'd recently re-read, there was a pause. "I liked the book—I think it's interesting," he said. "You shouldn't necessarily think that's my ideology." He went on, "I think the government has a role, but I believe free-market economies have turned out to be the best way of lifting economic prosperity for everyone." He felt strongly that planned economies and "huge" government interventions were generally harmful, but he allowed that, "at times like now, where we shut down the economy, of course you should have government intervention."

In late February, a few days before Messonnier warned the public about the pandemic, Mnuchin travelled to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, to attend the G-20 meeting of finance ministers and central-bank governors, and then spent three days in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, where he had nine more meetings scheduled. After he returned, on March 9th, the Italian government ordered a nationwide lockdown, which caused panic in world markets. The U.S.

stock market dropped almost eight per cent, its worst decline since the 2008 financial crisis. Trump, who watches the market obsessively, was finally forced to acknowledge the severity of the pandemic, and announced that he would encourage Congress to pursue a payroll-tax cut and draw up legislation to help workers who were losing their jobs. During the next two and a half weeks, Mnuchin and members of the House and the Senate furiously negotiated the two-trillion-dollar CARES Act, one of the most ambitious financial-rescue operations in American history.

Mnuchin, as a senior official who can work productively with Democrats in Congress, is an anomaly in the Administration. Beginning on March 10th, he raced back and forth among the White House, the Treasury Department, and Congress. He spoke dozens of times with Charles Schumer, the Democratic senator from New York, and with the House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, as they tried to come to an agreement on the contours of the legislation, which was signed into law on

March 27th. Mnuchin struck Pelosi as respectful and businesslike, and certainly much more rational than Trump, who routinely berates her in person and on Twitter.

Congress and Mnuchin were initially praised in the press for the swift passage of CARES, although Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, whose congressional district in New York suffered some of the highest rates of COVID-related death and who was one of the few members of Congress to come out against the legislation, described it as "shameful," saying that it would increase economic inequality. "Hospital workers do not have protective equipment," she said. "What did the Senate majority fight for? One of the largest corporate bailouts, with as few strings as possible, in American history."

There were also problems with the bill's implementation, including the fact that many large companies and chains received funding that had been intended for small businesses. Some of the problems appear to have been easily preventable, and were seen as connected to Mnuchin's management of the Treasury Department. A vast bureaucratic machine with nearly ninety thousand employees and an annual operating budget of around thirteen billion dollars, the department prints money, through the Bureau of Engraving and Printing; collects federal taxes, through the Internal Revenue Service; and issues and manages government debt, through Treasury securities. Sarah Bloom Raskin, the Deputy Treasury Secretary from 2014 to 2017, compared the Treasury to an orchestra. "Each part of it has its own set of deep talents that get nurtured to create this whole," she said. "Even pre-pandemic, the reports and results coming out of the Treasury were indicating that this kind of nurturing of talent and expertise wasn't happening."

Four months after the initial panic, the stock market has largely recovered, but unemployment remains at levels that approach those seen during the Great Depression. Since mid-March, Americans have filed more than fifty million claims for unemployment benefits. Industries such as tourism and hospitality, which employ millions of people, have been forced to halt or reduce their activity; some of them may



"O.K., I washed him out of my hair—now what? Blow-dry?"

never bounce back. The Administration has fostered chaos, with Trump suggesting that mask-wearing is a partisan act and leaving state authorities to impose their own rules on lockdowns. Americans are grappling with existential fears about the future, both economic and health-related. The U.S. now has more known cases of COVID-19 than any other country does, and the worst record among wealthy nations of controlling its spread. Since the Administration pushed governors to reopen their economies in order to get people back to work, infections have spiked in two dozen states, including Texas, Florida, Arizona, and Oklahoma.

To date, Black and Latino people, nursing-home residents, and low-income workers have suffered the highest rates of death and hospitalization. The Administration has been accused of indifference toward those vulnerable populations. On May 19th, when Mnuchin testified about the pandemic before the Senate Banking Committee, Sherrod Brown, Democrat of Ohio, declared, "Secretary Mnuchin, you said there's considerable risk of not reopening, that keeping some businesses closed could cause permanent economic damage. How many workers will die if we send people back to work without the protections they need?"

Mnuchin answered in the way he habitually does to such questions, confidently repeating his message and refusing to acknowledge evidence that contradicts it. "We don't intend to send anybody back to work without the protections," he said, adding that he had worn a mask earlier that day. "I assure you, both myself and everybody on the task force, the Vice-President and others, are following the best medical advice. I couldn't be more proud of the medical advice that we're getting, and the way the economy is opening up in a safe way."

At a time when even Republican voters are beginning to question Trump's competence, Mnuchin acts as his optimism ambassador, presenting a relentlessly sunny view of America's economic future. On June 23rd, at an event sponsored by Bloomberg, Mnuchin said that he expected a "spectacular rebound" later in the year, around the time of the election. Members of the Trump Administra-

tion have been counting on a "V-shaped" recovery as businesses reopen. But many experts believe that the economic downturn could broaden in the coming months, as the virus proliferates, individuals and companies fail to pay their bills, and people feel too fearful and too financially insecure to resume work patterns and spending habits. "Probably the best way of putting it in context is to say, 'This is as serious as it gets,'" Barry Eichengreen, an economics professor at Berkeley who studies financial crises, told me. "Now, suddenly, there are larger issues than who wins the next Presidential election: Can we function as a country? Is there any social solidarity? Is there any hope for dealing with this virus? I think the stakes are cosmic at this point."

All this makes Mnuchin one of the most consequential policymakers in the world. To some degree, he has the power to determine which industries and which companies will survive the crisis, which groups of Americans will get through it with relatively little long-term economic damage, and how equitable the recovery will be. In recent weeks, outbreaks have caused several parts of the country to pause their reopenings, and New York and other states that had got the virus under control began to require that some visitors quarantine. When I asked Mnuchin what he planned to do in response to the recent surge in cases, he gave only the vaguest answers, although he was clear that he would under no circumstances recommend shutting down the entire economy again. "This is not like a typical recession, which is economically induced," he told me. "This was medically induced. What's going to drive the economic models is going to be an advancement on the medical front. If we have a vaccine in December or January, I think we're going to have a much faster economic recovery. I don't really want to speculate on where we are next year."

Mnuchin grew up in a wealthy and well-connected family in New York City. His paternal great-grandfather, a Russian-born Jewish diamond dealer, immigrated to the United States in 1916. His grandfather Leon was a successful corporate lawyer and businessman, an art collector, and a founder

of the East Hampton Yacht Club.

Mnuchin's father, Robert, a lifelong Democrat, attended Yale University and then spent two years in the Army before joining Goldman Sachs, in 1957. Robert has described his first job there as "just a little bit short of sweeping the floors," at a starting salary of forty-eight dollars a week. In the sixties and seventies, he helped pioneer a practice called block trading, in which a bank buys large lots of stock acquired from a big investor, such as a mutual fund, that wants to get rid of it, and quickly resells it at a higher price, without disrupting the market. At the time, Goldman was still a private partnership, and block trading was considered a high-risk activity. It could also be enormously lucrative. Robert excelled at it and made his fortune. "He was playing nine-dimensional chess there," a former Goldman executive told me. "You had to think, If the butterfly beats its wings in Tokyo, what's the weather going to be like in Singapore?" Robert had a big personality and earned the nickname Coach. Another former executive told me, "Mnuch loved his block traders. He had an affection for the floor and the floor had an affection for him. He'd come out of his glass office, and take out his megaphone, and he'd say, 'Fifty thousand shares of whatever, we've got to work it in the next five minutes!'" In 1980, Robert joined the firm's management committee, where he served with Robert Rubin, who became the Treasury Secretary under President Bill Clinton.

In 1990, at the age of fifty-seven, Robert retired from Goldman Sachs. He devoted himself to refurbishing and running the historic Mayflower Inn in Washington, Connecticut, with his wife, and became an art dealer and a gallery owner, with a focus on modern American painters from Willem de Kooning to Jean-Michel Basquiat. He currently owns the Mnuchin Gallery, which is situated in a five-story town house on Manhattan's Upper East Side. In May, 2019, while bidding on behalf of a client, Robert broke the record for the most money ever paid at auction for a work by a living artist: \$91.1 million, including fees, for a Jeff Koons silver bunny sculpture.

Steven Mnuchin is the second-youngest of Robert's five children, including stepchildren. His mother, Elaine Turner

Cooper, was a patron of the arts. He attended Riverdale Country School, a private school in New York City, where his best subjects were math and science, and he was the captain of the tennis team. Mnuchin was known among his classmates for driving to school in a red Porsche, but during his Senate confirmation testimony, in 2017, he presented a more modest image of himself, telling the Finance Committee that his first job was in one of his maternal grandfather's glass-manufacturing plants. "It was there that I first learned the importance of humility, hard work, and commitment," he said. At Yale, he majored in economics, was "tapped" for the secret society Skull and Bones, and lived off campus with Edward Lampert, who went on to found the multibillion-dollar hedge fund ESL Investments. Mnuchin was also the publisher of the *Yale Daily News*, where, according to a 2017 account in the Yale publication *The New Journal*, he was part of a "sleek crew in Lacoste shirts who would glide in and out of the *News* building." An ad that Mnuchin ran in the *News* in 1982 seeking applicants to join the publishing side of the operation read, "Interested in Business? Money? Call Steve Mnuchin."

For three summers, he interned at the investment firm Salomon Brothers, where he worked with the bond traders Lewis Ranieri and Michael Mortara, who, in the early eighties, had helped create the market for mortgage-backed securities—bundles of home loans that are pooled together and can be traded on the secondary market. Selling these securities allowed banks to transfer the risk of loans they had made to other investors. Then, using the proceeds of these sales, they were able to make many more, often low-quality, mortgage loans. This system made it easier for homeowners to get mortgages. It also helped create the conditions that led to the 2008 financial crisis. Mnuchin has said that Ranieri and Mortara taught him "the importance of this market in providing ample and sound financing of housing for American families."

In 1985, after graduating from Yale, Mnuchin started working under Mortara, who had joined Goldman Sachs. Mortara was famous for commuting to Manhattan from Litchfield County, Connecticut, by helicopter. Within the

firm, Mnuchin was often referred to as "Bob's son," although, according to former bankers, he did not inspire the same admiration and loyalty as his father did. At the time, investment banks were expanding into mortgage-backed securities guaranteed by the U.S. government, including by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, federal entities created to make it easier for Americans to buy homes. Mnuchin began seeking out portfolios of distressed residential and commercial mortgages; he would modify or restructure the loans before selling them, months or years later, at a profit. "He was good at sniffing out value," a former colleague told me. "One thing Steve would have learned from Goldman Sachs is how to cut a deal and how to compromise." After nine years, Mnuchin became a partner. Lloyd Blankfein, a former C.E.O. of Goldman, told me that, when he was co-managing the bond-trading division at the firm, he had "five or six direct reports," including Mnuchin and Gary Cohn, who later became Goldman's president and then a top economic adviser in the Trump Administration. Mnuchin, Blankfein said, "was regarded as a very institutional guy who was going to be important to the future of Goldman Sachs."

Mnuchin married his first wife in 1992; they divorced in 1999. In May of

that year, Goldman Sachs held an initial public offering, which conferred immense wealth upon the firm's partners. Five months later, Mnuchin married Heather deForest Crosby, a socialite, a yoga-apparel entrepreneur, and a public-relations executive. They moved into a sixty-five-hundred-square-foot duplex apartment at 740 Park Avenue, one of the most expensive buildings in the world. Mnuchin remained at Goldman for two more years, as the chief information officer, working under Henry Paulson, who was then the C.E.O. Mnuchin left the firm in 2002, reportedly with forty-six million dollars in Goldman Sachs stock. (Mnuchin and Crosby had three children and divorced in 2014.)

For a year, he worked with Lampert, his former Yale roommate, at ESL Investments. Lampert specialized in buying into companies that he felt were undervalued, including AutoZone and Honeywell. Around the time Mnuchin arrived, Lampert acquired a majority stake in the retailer Kmart, and he put Mnuchin on the board of directors. ESL then pursued a private-equity model that has been widely criticized as extractive. In 2005, Lampert merged Kmart with Sears, and proceeded to close hundreds of stores and lay off hundreds of thousands of workers. He liquidated the retailers' real estate and many of their

A STRANGER

I wonder if my dead mother still thinks of me.
I know I don't know her new name. I don't know

her, not now. I don't know if "her" is the word
burning in a stranger's mind when he sees my dead

mother walking down the street in her bright black
dress. I wonder if he inhales the cigarette smoke

that will eventually kill him and thinks "I wish I knew
a woman who was both the light and every shadow

the light pierces." I wonder if a passing glance at my dead
mother is enough to make a poet out of anyone. I wonder

if I'm the song she hums as she waits for the light to change
or if I'm just the traffic signal holding her up.

—Saeed Jones

other assets, earning enormous profits for ESL while sending the merged company, Sears Holdings Corporation, into bankruptcy. (Mnuchin remained on the company's board until he joined the Trump Administration. In 2019, a group of Sears debtholders sued Lampert, Mnuchin, and other board members, alleging that they had stripped more than two billion dollars' worth of assets from the company; ESL vehemently denied the claim.)

Mnuchin kept moving on. In 2003, he joined SFM Capital Management, a fund started by George Soros to invest in companies that had declared bankruptcy or were close to doing so. Soon afterward, he launched his own hedge fund, Dune Capital, with two Goldman alumni and a seed investment from Soros. Mnuchin said that he and Trump met in 2003, through mutual friends. Later, Dune invested in two Trump projects: the Trump International Hotel Waikiki and the Trump International Hotel & Tower in Chicago. (In November, 2008, a day before a payment was due on the Chicago-tower construction loan, Trump sued his lenders, including Dune, demanding an extension.) In 2006, Dune and Soros were part of an investment group that bought DreamWorks studio's film library, in a transaction valued at nine hundred million dollars. "I understood technology very well, and I understood what was going to happen with bandwidth to the home, so the idea was to build up a content library," Mnuchin told me. Dune also invested in movies at Fox and Warner Bros., including "Avatar," one of the all-time highest-grossing films at the international box office.

Early in 2008, as panic spread through the financial markets, Bank of America announced plans to buy the mortgage lender Countrywide Financial, which was on the brink of collapse. JPMorgan Chase, with government backing, executed an emergency takeover of Bear Stearns, which held billions of dollars of declining mortgage bonds. People waited anxiously for the next bank to fail. Throughout the housing boom, the Los Angeles-based bank IndyMac had been an aggressive lender. In 2006, the company had originated ninety billion dollars' worth of mortgages, a high proportion of which had

been made without proper verification of the borrowers' incomes. Senator Schumer wrote a letter to banking regulators, which was publicized, expressing concern that IndyMac posed "significant risks to both taxpayers and borrowers." In July, 2008, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, which insures the nation's bank deposits, seized the bank and briefly closed its doors. People rushed to IndyMac branches to try to withdraw their money, only to be greeted by signs that said the F.D.I.C. was "taking possession of the bank." Aaron Glantz, the author of "Home-wreckers," a 2019 book about several financiers, including Mnuchin, who made money from the 2008 crisis, described the scene to me: "There are lines of consumers around the block pushing and shoving, people are passing out in ninety-degree heat, and it's the beginning of what's obviously a much, much bigger catastrophe. It's reminding people of the Depression."

The savings-and-loan crisis of the nineteen-eighties and nineties, when hundreds of banks collapsed after being deregulated, had shown that fortunes could be made in moments of desperation. Now federal regulators, eager to find private entities to take over failing banks, offered extremely favorable terms and minimal risk. Mnuchin contacted executives at Lehman Brothers, the investment bank working with IndyMac, to express his interest in potentially taking it over. The Lehman bankers asked him, Have you ever bought a bank? He hadn't. Do you have a license to buy a bank? He did not. Many people were skeptical of Mnuchin's endeavor until he recruited Warren Buffett to join him. Soon afterward, Mnuchin formed a consortium of five investors, including Michael Dell, the founder of Dell; John Paulson, who ran a hedge fund that had made fifteen billion dollars in 2007 by betting that the housing market would fall; and Soros. Buffett did not end up participating, but the group won the bid.

The F.D.I.C. imposed some conditions on IndyMac's new owners—they had to modify, rather than foreclose on, as many mortgages as possible—but Mnuchin and his colleagues were free to keep any profits they made, and the F.D.I.C. agreed to cover most losses on deteriorating mortgage loans that they

had inherited. They renamed the company OneWest, and, just a year later, reported a profit of \$1.57 billion. OneWest showed profits from that point on, while the F.D.I.C. paid the company back for losses it incurred. In the course of five years, the F.D.I.C. paid out more than a billion dollars. In defending what seems like an absurdly bad deal for the F.D.I.C., Sheila Bair, a former head of the organization and a George W. Bush appointee, has pointed out that Mnuchin's group was the only one willing to buy IndyMac in its entirety, and that, without Mnuchin's initiative, the government would have lost even more money.

Mnuchin, who had reportedly invested at least ten million dollars in the deal, became the OneWest chairman and C.E.O. He moved to Bel Air and bought a twenty-thousand-square-foot house. He described OneWest as a "community bank," but in the next five years it foreclosed on thirty-six thousand homes in California, many of them in low-income neighborhoods. Local activists began to call Mnuchin "the foreclosure king." In October, 2011, about a hundred protesters gathered outside Mnuchin's mansion, demanding that OneWest allow a state employee named Rose Gudiel and her parents to remain in their home, in La Puente, in the San Gabriel Valley. OneWest had started foreclosure proceedings after the Gudiels were late with a payment in 2009—Rose Gudiel later said that she'd tried for two years to secure a mortgage modification—and the family received an eviction notice. "Instead of working with people to modify loans, OneWest was running a foreclosure machine," Paulina Gonzalez, the executive director of the California Reinvestment Coalition, a local group that advocates for fair housing for immigrants and minority homeowners, told me. Approximately seventy per cent of OneWest's foreclosures were in neighborhoods where most of the residents were people of color, according to the C.R.C.'s data. Such trends were playing out nationwide, but, according to the C.R.C. and to Aaron Glantz, OneWest was one of the worst offenders.

In spite of the controversy, OneWest expanded throughout Southern California, and in 2015 Mnuchin sold the

company to CIT Group, a large national lender, for \$3.4 billion. (Mnuchin reportedly came away with several hundred million dollars.) To gain regulatory approval for the sale, he had to prove that OneWest was in compliance with the Community Reinvestment Act, a 1977 anti-redlining law encouraging banks to serve low- and moderate-income neighborhoods. OneWest had done almost no lending to Black and Latino families who wanted to buy homes as the economy recovered. (In 2019, the Department of Housing and Urban Development approved a settlement between OneWest and groups that alleged it had engaged in discriminatory lending practices.) Nevertheless, the company pledged to invest more in minority and low-income neighborhoods, and the sale to CIT received regulatory approval. (In 2017, President Trump appointed Joseph Otting, who had worked with Mnuchin at OneWest, to lead the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency. Otting spent much of his time at the O.C.C. revising the Community Reinvestment Act to make it weaker. He left the agency in May.)

When I asked Mnuchin about the controversy surrounding IndyMac and OneWest, he said, “I think this whole thing about me and mortgage foreclosures isn’t fair.” Many of the souring home loans that IndyMac was servicing couldn’t be modified, he said, leaving the bank with no choice but to foreclose on owners who stopped paying. (Gonzalez said that IndyMac had also foreclosed on many owners with mortgages that could be modified.) “I never wanted to foreclose on those people,” Mnuchin said. “Having someone’s home foreclosed upon is a terrible experience.”

On April 19, 2016, Mnuchin was invited to a party at Trump Tower, on Fifth Avenue, hosted by the Trump campaign, which was celebrating its victory in the New York Republican primary. Mnuchin and Trump greeted each other on the escalator and started talking, and Trump invited Mnuchin to join him onstage. Mnuchin stood behind him, grinning, during the victory speech. The next morning, Trump asked Mnuchin to be his national finance chairman. Glantz said that, for Mnuchin and certain other Wall Street figures, such as Wilbur Ross, an investor who

became the U.S. Commerce Secretary, Trump presented an opportunity. “These are people who have made their careers placing bets on unlikely winners,” he said. In the case of Trump, Glantz went on, Mnuchin “got in on the ground floor. He bet big after the bust, flipped the bank, and made money off of that, and now he’s looking for a new project—and his new project is Donald Trump, getting him elected President.”

On Saturday, February 11, 2017, Mnuchin attended the seventieth-birthday party of Stephen Schwarzman, the co-founder of the seventy-billion-dollar private-equity firm the Blackstone Group, at Schwarzman’s home in Palm Beach. Schwarzman and his wife are known for hosting extravagant events, and this one featured acrobats, camels, fireworks over the Intracoastal Waterway, and a performance by Gwen Stefani, who sang “Happy Birthday” at midnight. Jared Kushner, Ivanka Trump, and the incoming Trump Administration Cabinet members Wilbur Ross and Elaine Chao were among the guests. Two days later, Mnuchin was confirmed by the Senate, in a party-line vote of fifty-three to forty-seven. Shortly afterward, he walked into the Oval Office to be sworn in. He was accompanied by his fiancée, Louise Linton, a Scottish-born actress in her late thirties, and he listened politely as Trump faced a bank of news cameras. “Steven, I want



to congratulate you,” Trump said, turning toward Mnuchin, who smiled nervously. “A lot of people wanted that position, Steven! A lot of people. A lot of very successful people. But I’ve known you for a long time, and I know how smart you are, and how great you will be for our country.” That summer, Mnuchin and Linton were married, in the Andrew W. Mellon Auditorium, in D.C., in a service officiated by Vice-President Mike Pence. *Town & Country* pub-

lished a portfolio of the diamond jewelry that Linton wore at the wedding.

Andrew Mellon, the former Treasury Secretary, founded the National Gallery of Art, and the museum has a tradition of lending art works to senior Administration officials for their offices; Mnuchin chose five paintings by Mark Rothko for his. Some Obama-era Treasury staffers were understandably wary of the new regime, but when Mnuchin arrived they were relieved to discover that he was polite and professional. Mnuchin opened his first staff meeting by telling everyone that he was honored to be there. Then he said, “I am a micromanager, and I wear that term with pride.” Did his comment reflect a wariness of former Obama staffers, his new team wondered? It turned out to be an accurate description of how he worked. Mnuchin wanted to be involved in decisions from filling junior positions to picking fonts for the covers of reports. His chief of staff, a former Trump-campaign officer named Eli Miller, tried to manage his schedule, but Mnuchin preferred not to delegate, often popping into staffers’ offices to ask a question or calling them over to see him. Some colleagues had the impression that Mnuchin was trying to run the Treasury Department as if it were a small business. A former Treasury staffer referred to him as “minutiae Mnuchin.”

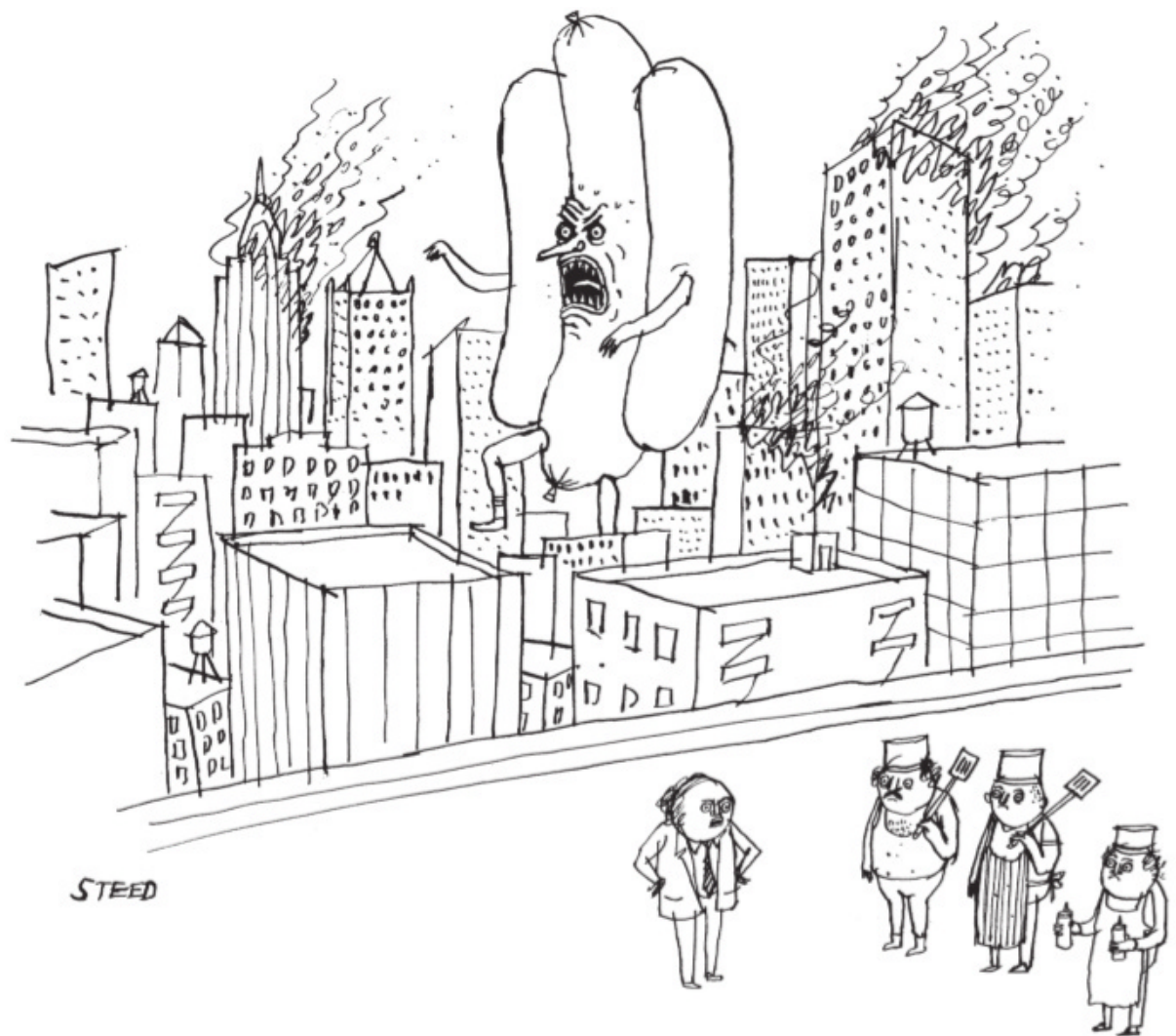
Under pressure from Congress, the Treasury had endured staffing and budget cuts for years, particularly to the I.R.S. According to some estimates, these cuts led to billions in lost tax revenue annually. Soon after Mnuchin’s arrival, the Office of Management and Budget, led by Mick Mulvaney, requested a ten-per-cent cut at the Treasury, which necessitated a hiring freeze and a reduction in personnel. Morale was low. Some of the most talented members of the department left for jobs in the private sector, where demand for their skills was high, and it was difficult to replace them. Former department officials say that this gradually resulted in a staffing shortage, the severity of which didn’t become fully evident until the coronavirus crisis hit.

Trump had won the election, in part, on promises to cut taxes and to repeal the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, and replace it with “much

better health care” that would cost less. On the day of his Inauguration, he signed an executive order that was intended to facilitate the new health-care legislation, but the bill, which did not specify an alternative provision, quickly got stuck in Congress. The press portrayed this as a humiliating loss for the new Administration, and Mnuchin went to work on assembling the most significant change to the tax system since the Reagan years.

Top department officials and tax-policy experts met daily to discuss the tax bill, but, a former Treasury adviser said, “the Administration didn’t really have a proactive agenda. During the Obama Administration, there was this relentless focus on the mission and things they could use government to do. And there was nothing like that. We got ‘tax reform,’ but there was nothing else. The whole building felt it. That and ‘Go pull out regulations for no reason.’”

In the end, the new legislation was based on two long-standing Republican blueprints, one from the former House Ways and Means Committee chairman David Camp, and the other from the House Speaker at the time, Paul Ryan. Mnuchin and others claimed that the new Trump tax bill would “pay for itself” by sparking growth in jobs, wages, and corporate profits, which would lead to greater tax revenues flowing back to the government. According to the former Treasury adviser, Mnuchin, hoping to find evidence to support this, relied on the analysts in his department “to run models that would somehow prove that out.” But it was clear to most tax experts that the bill was far from “revenue neutral” and would add significantly to the deficit. Democrats doubted that the cuts would lead to the promised wage increases for middle-income workers. Treasury Department analysts were also “skeptical, to say the least,” the former adviser said, although almost no one challenged Mnuchin. Eventually, analysts were able to model the answers he wanted. “They said, ‘If you put in these ridiculous growth numbers, you could spit out a result that says it arguably increases the baseline,’” the former adviser told me. “I never understood any of the models to show it paying for itself.” Justin Muzinich, a former Morgan Stanley banker and



“This is it, boys, the moment you’ve been training for.”

hedge-fund manager who was serving as a senior counsellor to Mnuchin, tried to assuage the analysts’ concerns, and told them that the department was simply testing out a wide range of different growth assumptions.

In the midst of the debate over the new tax plan, Mnuchin and his wife became the subject of tabloid scandals. In August, 2017, Linton posted a photograph on Instagram of her and Mnuchin disembarking from a government plane at Fort Knox, in Kentucky; she included hashtags naming the brands she was wearing—Hermès, Tom Ford, Roland Mouret, and Valentino. After a woman from Oregon left a comment criticizing the apparent use of taxpayer money for Linton’s travel, Linton responded, “Aw!!! Did you think this was a personal trip?! . . . Lololol. Have you given more to the economy than me and my husband?” She added, “Thanks for the passive aggressive nasty comment.” A series of unflattering news articles followed, portraying Linton as a plutocrat’s out-of-touch trophy wife. Three months later, Mnuchin and Linton

posed for photographers at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, in Washington, D.C., clutching a freshly printed sheet of dollar bills bearing Mnuchin’s signature. For the occasion, Linton wore a black leather Michael Kors outfit and opera gloves; an article in *Vogue* called her Cruella de Vil. Eventually, Linton admitted that she had been a “bozo” to reply so rudely to the woman in Oregon, and refocused her Instagram on animal-rights activism. (She and Mnuchin have spent their lockdown in D.C. with five rescue dogs.)

The legislation that was finally proposed, in November of 2017, the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, included a permanent corporate tax cut, from thirty-five to twenty-one per cent, and modest reductions in individual tax rates, which would expire in 2025. The Treasury Department promised to put forth a detailed analysis of the legislation, but in December released only a one-page summary of it. The bill contained a controversial loophole, pertaining to tax on carried interest, that Trump had promised to eliminate. The loophole, which has

existed for decades, permits hedge-fund and private-equity-fund partners to tax their earnings at a much lower rate than most other workers. Shortly before the Senate was set to vote on the bill, the former Administration official said, a group of advisers met with the President in the Oval Office, arguing that, in allowing the loophole to remain, they would be providing ammunition to Democrats. Mnuchin, determined to secure the vote in the Republican Senate, encouraged Trump to leave the loophole in. No one in the group was willing to take a stand against it, and the bill passed. “In part, it was because everyone wanted a win, and you didn’t want to be the guy standing between Trump and a win,” the former Administration official said. Mnuchin and other top Administration officials seemed triumphant. The former Treasury staffer recalled that he’d seen Mnuchin and his deputies savoring the victory the following morning. “All that was missing was top hats and cigars,” the staffer told me. “It reminded me of Monopoly men sitting around the table.” It was at that moment, the staffer said, that he decided to leave the government.

In April, 2018, the Congressional Budget Office released its analysis of the bill, which showed that it was likely to create only 0.7 per cent of additional economic growth—a fraction of what Republicans had predicted—and projected that it would lead to a \$1.9-trillion increase in the deficit by 2028. An analysis by the liberal-leaning Brookings Institution called the law “the wrong thing at the wrong time,” adding, “It will take resources from future generations and from today’s lower- and middle-income households to enrich today’s well-to-do.”

Senator Sherrod Brown told me that the bill “accomplished what they wanted. It didn’t accomplish what they said it would accomplish”—namely, as Trump told Congress, “massive tax relief for the middle class.” Brown continued, “What they wanted was major tax cuts to corporations and wealthy people.” These corporations did not generally invest the money they saved in their workers or in extra resources but instead engaged in “big stock buybacks”—an activity that benefitted executives and stockholders but few others. In the months since the

coronavirus outbreak, Brown went on, many of these same companies have found themselves without a cushion. “Now they’re coming to the government for help,” he said.

By early March, 2020, Bernie Sanders, once the Democratic front-runner, and a self-described democratic socialist, had lost South Carolina and several other critical Presidential primaries to Joe Biden. At the same time, the novel coronavirus was infiltrating the United States. According to a financier with ties to G.O.P. politics, the Trump Administration had no choice but to be aggressive in its response: “It’s not just one piece of the economy that froze. The government has said to the economy and all the participants in it, Stop, just get in your homes. And that just basically turned the economy off. And that is unprecedented. If you don’t want revolution, you’ve just got to get money into people’s pockets.” Mnuchin quickly embraced the idea of sending cash payments directly to Americans.

One of the sticking points in the proposed bill was about paid sick leave, which Democrats were pushing to make mandatory, including for contractors and gig workers, and to leave in place even once COVID-19 had passed. On the evening of March 13th, after four days of intense negotiations, Mnuchin and Pelosi announced that they had reached a compromise, which included two weeks of paid sick leave during the pandemic and up to three months of paid leave for workers caring for children home from school.

Katie Porter, a House Democrat from California, told me that, though she and Mnuchin have distinctly different ideas about how to best help working people, she appreciates that he is willing to engage on the issues, and that he rarely takes public stances on non-Treasury topics. With Mnuchin, she said, “there’s an opportunity here to collaborate and to be successful.”

“He’s one of the few competent people in the Trump Administration, and he had his hands in everything,” a congressional aide close to the talks said. The aide noted that Mnuchin’s attention to detail came with disadvantages: “If he’s focussing on the airlines one day, then no one is thinking about the small-business program while he’s

doing that. He can’t be everywhere.”

On March 17th, Mnuchin tried to prepare Republican senators by warning that unemployment could reach twenty per cent; he didn’t need to point out that this would have implications for their reelection prospects. Later that day, at a press briefing with Trump, he said, “Americans need cash now, and the President wants to get cash now. And I mean now.” Trump added, “We’re going big.”

Companies quickly lobbied for their own rescue packages. Boeing, America’s largest aerospace company, requested sixty billion dollars in loans and other aid; a trade group representing the restaurant industry, which employs more than fifteen million people, asked for four hundred and fifty-five billion dollars. Democrats and Republicans disagreed on two critical issues. The first concerned extending taxpayer money to corporations. Should companies be required to retain all their workers as a condition of receiving a loan, or would they be allowed to implement layoffs? Could they allocate bonuses to C.E.O.s? Should they grant ownership rights to the government? Should they be forced to commit to changes that addressed climate change? Left-leaning members of Congress such as Elizabeth Warren argued that this was a rare moment when the government had tremendous leverage to compel companies to improve their behavior.

The other issue had to do with oversight. Given the Administration’s record of granting favorable treatment to Trump’s friends and allies, Democrats argued for robust oversight. At a press briefing on March 23rd, Trump responded to a question about this subject by saying, “I’ll be the oversight. We are going to make good deals.” Warren began referring to the money as a “slush fund.” Sherrod Brown told me, “They resisted every rule, every kind of transparency and accountability that we were able to negotiate. That doesn’t mean we didn’t have some success—we did.” On March 25th, after some provisions were added, the Senate unanimously passed the CARES Act. The two-trillion-dollar economic rescue package provided one-time twelve-hundred-dollar cash payments to people earning less than seventy-five thousand dollars a year, an extra six hundred dollars of unemploy-

ment-insurance benefits a week, and the extension of benefits to self-employed workers. It also created a three-hundred-and-fifty-billion-dollar lending program for businesses with fewer than five hundred employees, called the Paycheck Protection Program (P.P.P.), designed to allow them to keep workers on their payrolls. Forty-six billion dollars was assigned to bail out the aviation and national-security industries.

There was enormous pressure to issue the twelve-hundred-dollar economic-hardship checks immediately, but the Treasury Department instructed the I.R.S. to print Trump's name on them, a decision that may have delayed the release. (The I.R.S. said the payments were "on schedule.") It also emerged that, without the small codes known as "flags" attached to the electronic payments, the money could be garnished by private debt collectors. There were issues, too, with the P.P.P. The program was intended to give companies enough money to avoid layoffs; if a business used at least seventy-five per cent of its loan to pay workers, then the loan would be forgiven, effectively making it a grant. (The figure was later changed to sixty per cent.) The Treasury Department could have chosen to administer the loans and wire the money to recipients itself, but the task was initially outsourced to large banks, which were repaid by the Small Business Administration, earning hundreds of millions of dollars in fees in the process. The banks had more incentive to lend money to bigger companies.

During the first few weeks of the program, many of the small companies that it was intended to help had trouble navigating its cumbersome application system. Meanwhile, there was a problematic loophole in the language of the P.P.P., which stated that "any business concern that employs not more than 500 employees per physical location" in the hospitality sector would be eligible for the taxpayer-backed forgivable loan. Large businesses, including Ruth's Chris Steak House, Shake Shack, and the Los Angeles Lakers, received multimillion-dollar grants. After a public outcry, these companies and many others returned the money voluntarily, and the Treasury Department scrambled to amend the rules.

Mnuchin initially resisted calls to release names of any of the loan recipients, but in July, after a backlash from lawmakers, the Treasury Department agreed to disclose six hundred and fifty thousand companies that had received more than a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Among them were investment firms, major chains that had private-equity investors, and the Riviera Country Club, a Los Angeles golf club of which Mnuchin is a member. ProPublica revealed that at least six companies owned by the West Virginia governor, Jim Justice, received as much as twenty-four million dollars. Larry Kudlow, the director of the National Economic Council, and one of Trump's top economic advisers, said that he was not embarrassed by these revelations: "If you have five hundred or fewer employees, and you were able to meet the condition that seventy-five per cent of the money goes to payroll, then Kanye West gets his money, and so does Nightingale-Bamford, in New York. That's the deal. And, if there are glitches in that, then they were bipartisan glitches."

Michelle Holder, an economist at John Jay College, in New York, who specializes in race and the labor market, told me that, in spite of its flaws,

the CARES Act saved many people and businesses from financial ruin: "The Paycheck Protection Program—the roll-out of that has been incredibly bumpy, incredibly inequitable, but it was good to talk about small businesses maintaining their staffing levels."

Another, somewhat opaque, part of the CARES Act bailout consisted of an allocation of four hundred and fifty-four billion dollars to aid large corporations and state and local governments, through a variety of lending programs administered by the Federal Reserve in conjunction with the Treasury Department. This has pushed the Fed, normally a conservative institution, to participate aggressively in the financial markets. Using the funds it received from Congress as a kind of collateral, the Fed potentially has at its disposal a staggering four trillion dollars, which it can lend directly to companies or governments, or indirectly, by buying bonds in the open market—whether municipal bonds or risky junk debt. In many cases, the Fed is not required to impose conditions on the companies whose bonds it is purchasing, even as its actions provide valuable financial support. As soon as the CARES Act was announced, the stock market began to rise



in anticipation of the Fed's actions, even as tens of millions of Americans filed for unemployment insurance, millions lost their employer-provided health care, and one in three reported being unable to afford monthly rent.

This was seen as evidence that, though the bailout had succeeded in rescuing the financial markets, the prospects of regular people remained precarious. According to Gary Gensler, the former head of the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, the stock market is not an accurate measure of public welfare. "Most Americans aren't directly invested in the stock market, and, even if they are, it's a small amount, and it's their retirement savings," he said. "The stock market's ups and downs are not going to put food on your table."

I suggested to Mnuchin that there was a striking disconnect between the performance of the stock market and the health of the real economy, but he shrugged it off. Most of the CARES Act money was directed at the P.P.P., individual checks, and unemployment-insurance payments, he said, which helped individuals and smaller companies, which are part of the real economy: "By doing those three things, we created a lot of liquidity for people, which was I think the right thing to do." He added that the Fed lending program had also "created liquidity" for companies to get through the crisis.

"The purpose of the Treasury and the Fed facilities is to provide normal market access, when markets don't function," he said. "The markets have come back and functioned."

Sam Long, a small-business investor who writes about the economy, said that the Fed program has enabled three wealth transfers: from the middle and working classes to the affluent, who own most of the stocks and bonds whose prices have been propped up by the Fed; from the cautious to the reckless, who have seen the risk in their dubious business decisions eliminated; and from the young people of today, who will end up paying back all the borrowed money, to the older people, who are now benefitting from it.

It seems natural to compare the current moment to the 2008 financial crisis—the most severe economic downturn in recent memory—but that crisis was centered on one sector: the housing market. A more appropriate comparison may be to the Great Depression. In 1933, when Franklin D. Roosevelt took office, the country had been mired in depression for three years, and the unemployment rate was well over twenty per cent. F.D.R.'s predecessor, Herbert Hoover, had resisted arguments that the federal government should assist struggling individuals directly by creating jobs and providing financial support. But, under Roosevelt, the government

hired millions of unemployed Americans and launched a series of public-works projects, building dams, bridges, highways, schools, and parks. Electricity and more efficient farming methods were introduced in the rural South and the Midwest. Roosevelt and many of his advisers, including his Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr., came from elite, wealthy families and had backgrounds in law and business. They used their expertise to develop ambitious social programs, such as Social Security and unemployment insurance, and financial reforms, such as the F.D.I.C., that helped prevent bank runs. In a radio address in 1932, F.D.R. explained why he thought it wasn't sufficient simply to return to the pre-Depression economy. "There are two theories of prosperity and to well-being. First, the theory that if we make the rich richer, somehow they will let a part of their prosperity trickle through to the rest of us," he said. "But very, very early in the history of mankind, there was that second theory that if we make the average of mankind comfortable and make them secure in their existence, then their prosperity will rise upward through the ranks."

Economic historians told me that the state of the country in 1932 was more dire than it is now. Barry Eichengreen, of Berkeley, said, "I think what's missing compared to those earlier crises is fully institutional, innovative thinking about how the structure of the economy—of the financial system and of the public sector in particular—needs to change in light of events. I have this strong sense that we now need to turn from keeping restaurants and businesses afloat and keeping people on the payroll to thinking about how the economy after the coronavirus is going to look different than it looked before. The crisis is a reminder that the private sector, left to its own devices, doesn't always manage those challenges optimally. That kind of strategic planning, thinking about what happens next, isn't happening. And it needs to." When I asked Mnuchin whether he had thought about initiating bigger structural changes, he paused for a long time, as if struggling with what to say. "I like to study economic history, and I love biographies," he said eventually. "I think you learn



"This is the precise reason I didn't want bamboo flooring."

certain lessons from the past. But, again, no situation is ever the same.”

By the end of May, the situation had changed again. The legislation that Mnuchin had ushered through to address the pandemic seemed to have largely worked in the short term to rescue parts of the economy. Then public attention shifted to the nationwide demonstrations against police violence and racism which followed the killing of George Floyd, in Minneapolis. Increasingly, American political debate became focussed on reforming police departments across the country, on racial injustice, and on extreme income inequality, including the racial wealth gap: the median household wealth of Black families has barely changed since 1968, and a typical Black family’s net worth is a tenth that of a typical white family.

In early June, Michelle Holder, of John Jay College, told me that, in Harlem, where she lives, “you can literally cut the mood with a knife. People in my neighborhood are scared, they’re angry, they’re hurt, they’re depressed.... It may be difficult for someone like the Treasury Secretary to relate to what is happening with the everyday Joe and Joanna, whether they be Black or white or brown. I don’t know if someone like him can really understand it at a deep level.”

When I spoke to Mnuchin that week, he insisted that the civil unrest had nothing to do with inequality or with policy failures that might have led to economic frustration. He pointed out that the Administration had been generous with emergency aid, giving people an extra six hundred dollars a week on top of their regular unemployment benefits. For some people, these funds added up to more money than they had been making before the pandemic. Floyd’s killing was “very concerning,” Mnuchin went on. “My thoughts go out to his family.” But, like many Republicans, Mnuchin was more concerned with the destruction and the thefts that had occurred during the largely peaceful protests than with the actual meaning of the movement. “This is no longer about peaceful demonstrations,” he said. “Obviously, the looting and the situation that’s gotten out of control is very, very concerning for lots of reasons.” He went on, “The thing that’s really sad about this is the wealthy businesses that are being hit and the big com-

panies that are being affected are going to be fine. But these small businesses that are being devastated by these crowds were just starting to reopen, and they may never recover.”

Eichengreen disagreed that the protests had little to do with economic inequality. He noted the vast numbers of young people of all races who were participating, and pointed out that, in addition to anger and frustration about systemic racial inequities, they were likely despairing over their diminishing prospects and the possibility that they would never achieve the living standards of their parents. “People take to the streets in part when they can’t take to the office,” he

said. “We know from previous crises, such as 2008 and 2009, that these economic events cast a very long-lived economic scar—that, if you don’t get that internship in the summer between junior and senior year, you’re never going to get on the ladder of employment in that industry. Kids know that. We were already worried about all these things before. People have been reminded of the fragility of their economic prospects and the fragility of their hopes.”

I spoke with Mnuchin again at the end of June, when the governors of Florida and Texas were confronting an explosion in the number of COVID cases. Trump had expected to campaign for reelection by heralding low unemployment and an ascendant stock market. I asked Mnuchin how he thought Trump should try to appeal to voters now. “I think the pitch has been, and will be, that he has a great economic team that has worked with him on building the economy, and that will rebuild the economy,” Mnuchin said. “We’ve worked in an unprecedented way, in a bipartisan way, to channel relief to hardworking Americans and businesses, unlike anybody’s ever done before.”

Then he said he wanted to clarify what he’d said about race and inequality in one of our earlier discussions. “You asked me if there was a connection around the economic conditions of COVID and what was going on, and I think I said I did not,” he said. “But I think we always need to do a better job

of making sure that the people who have been left behind have the right economic advantages.” He went on, “Whether that’s because minorities don’t have the same access to education, or what I saw travelling the country with the President during the campaign, when people said average Americans’ wages have not gone up in eight years by any significant amount.” He noted that, before the pandemic, the U.S. had the lowest Black unemployment rate in history: “We all need to do a much better job on these issues. It’s less in my view about income inequality, and it’s more about income opportunities.”

Mnuchin was reluctant to acknowledge that even modest reforms were necessary. Raising minimum wages was a “complicated” matter best left to the states. He was similarly against the idea, endorsed by Elizabeth Warren and other Democrats, of raising the tax rate on investment income so that it is no longer lower than the tax rate on labor income, insisting that lower rates on capital gains spur economic development. When I asked about the U.S. having the highest income inequality among the G-7 nations, he said that the numbers were skewed by Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon and the wealthiest person in the world, and by people like him. This struck me as bizarre; even without taking into account the fortunes of such outliers, inequality in the U.S. is greater than it has been since the nineteen-twenties. Still, Mnuchin went on, Bezos had created an enormously successful company and deserved his wealth, which is estimated at around a hundred and eighty billion dollars.

“I don’t believe the redistribution of wealth is the right solution,” he said. “I believe the right solution is to create equality of opportunity, and a big part of that is around education. And job training. And mentoring.” The Trump Administration doesn’t appear to have made investments in education or job training a priority. I asked him whether everyone in America has an equal shot at succeeding. “It’s a complicated question,” he said. A few seconds passed. “I think that we’ve unfortunately seen that not everyone has an equal shot.” ♦



JACK AND DELLA

Marilynne Robinson

His father would say, “You are not good for your own sake. That probably isn’t even possible. You are good as a courtesy to everyone around you. Keeping a promise or breaking it, telling the truth or lying—these things matter to those around you. So there is good you can do and can always do again. You do not have to believe you are good in order to act well in any specific case. You never lose that option.”

He said this from the pulpit, but he was saying it to Jack, who, to distract him from the parsing of some recent mischief, had almost confided to his father that he had certain doubts about his soul. This near-confession was probably meant to stir his father to the kind of gentle exasperation that meant he’d be brooding about Jack for a week and preaching to him on Sunday—it was another boyish prank, really, even though what he had told his father was true enough. The whole congregation would have understood when his father said that good manners were an excellent beginning, a kind of discipline that could lead to actual virtue, given time. Jack could be terribly polite. Everyone in that sanctuary who was old enough to be capable of the slightest cynicism would be thinking, Butter would not melt in that boy’s mouth! He was great at setting teeth on edge. They also understood that a minister had to find hope where he could, like anybody else. Jack would sometimes stand beside his father, grinning, shaking hands as the flock filed out, much more than charming, and his father’s irritation and embarrassment would register as a tremor in the arm he put around him.

From all his father’s careful instruction this sermon on good manners was the one teaching that Jack had taken away. Then a young Black lady in a lavender coat dropped an armful of papers on the pavement in a rainstorm and he crossed the street to help her gather them up. Dozens of vocabulary tests. “Use each of these words in a sentence: stamen, stealthy, stencil.” The wind sent a few of them scudding off, and he handed her his umbrella and ran a few steps to catch them. There was laughter involved. She said, “Thank you, Reverend,” out of respect for the

dark suit he was honest enough to sell once it had dried out, so that he could stop deceiving people in that particular way. He had bought it used for his mother’s funeral, but he knew he would not make it home, and, besides, he scrupled. His reluctance to toy with what were sometimes people’s better impulses had brought that word to mind. There was little enough to be gained from the suit, in any case. There was an unseemliness in asking a fellow for a dime or a smoke while wearing a suit like that one. Being unshaved was no help. Once or twice he heard out a tirade on the corruptions of the clergy by someone who had taken his actual, ordinary life for his secret life—had thought him a preacher on the bad side of town, abject with drink and general dissolution. That suit made a hypocrite of him.

Still, when the lady to whom he had been so courteous said, “Thank you, Reverend,” it was as if she thought she knew him, as if her opinion of him were favorable beyond the fact of his having lent her an umbrella—which he would have to have back, since the gentle candor of her expression made him certain he had to be rid of that suit, which was depreciating by the minute. So he took the umbrella from her hand and walked her to her door, enjoying the gallantry of the gesture, nicely balanced between apparent and real. He had got his umbrella back without quite taking it from her. And when they reached her door she had asked him in. “The rain might be letting up a little,” she said, “if you have time for a cup of tea. . . .” This was definitely bold of her, since he was a white man, though her mistaking him for a minister might seem to make this matter less. He thought one of his sisters—Glory, maybe—would invite a stranger in off the street on the recommendation of a clerical look and a minor kindness, never thinking to ask whether he had, for example, been released from prison lately. In a couple of dozen months he had acquired habits he knew he might never outlive. Even then, taking a chair at a small table by a window, surrounded by the modest good order and general teacherliness of her apartment, he kept searching his memory for a word that rhymed with “scruple.” “Quadruple.” He was calming himself, which meant

that he was nervous. Jesus was there among the pictures on the upright piano, the only one in color. “Quintuple” doesn’t rhyme. How can that be? Sweet Jesus, don’t let me say anything strange. So he said, “What brings you to St. Louis?”

“I teach at Sumner.”

She brought tea in an old-fashioned china pot with a chip in its spout. She gave him a cup and saucer that somehow commemorated Memphis. Sunday things, because he was a minister. He couldn’t see what her cup commemorated, but it was small and ornate like his. Like the cups that lined a narrow shelf in the kitchen at home, at once pointedly and futilely out of his reach. Those little handles break off so easily, and they can’t really be glued on again. His sisters had tried and tried. Hope, the musical sister, had hands like hers, slender and somehow lively. He said, “Do you play?”

“Not really. Not very well. Do you?”

“‘Onward, Christian Soldiers.’” She laughed. Actually, the only part of prison he missed, besides a predictable lunch, was playing piano for chapel services, which were sometimes funerals. He had worked up barrelhouse versions of some very solemn hymns.

She said, “The piano belongs to the woman I share this place with. Her mother left it to her. She doesn’t really play much, either.”

He said, for some reason, “I often regret . . .” and thought it best not to continue.

She nodded. “My parents had a terrible time getting me to practice. I told them I wanted to be a poet!”

Interesting. “Did you ever stop wanting to be a poet?”

She shrugged. “I haven’t stopped yet. I suppose someday I will. I don’t have much to show for it. My grandmother met Paul Dunbar once. I guess that gave me the idea. I have a book he signed for her. It was her treasure. Now it’s my treasure.”

He said, “That’s very nice,” and he thought, Don’t show it to me. Don’t put it down anywhere near me. That old fellow dozing on a bench with his umbrella hooked over the back of it, and his cane, too, must have been waked up when the rain began and hobbled off somewhere, cursing himself for his own trusting nature. Then came that

difficult algebra: Did the exasperation Jack had caused that man cancel out the kindness he had done under the inspiration of a handsome umbrella? A kindness done to this particular lady because he was ready to enjoy the courtesy that was so newly and fortuitously possible for him? She did have a sweet face, a warm laugh. And he hoped he'd have helped her gather up her papers in any case. But the umbrella made a performance of it. As he hurried back to her she lifted it a little to include him under it. Then he held it over her and walked her to her door. She called him Reverend and offered him tea, and he stepped over a threshold into a world where there would, of course, be a hymnal open on the piano, the odds and ends of a grandmother's china, no doubt a hundred trifling things not at all worth stealing that he could slip into his pocket, given the chance. She said, "I'll show you that book." He almost said, "Please don't." But in a moment there it was, open on her two hands to the page with the signature. Then she put it down on the table by the sofa and came back to her chair. "I'm always afraid I'll spill something on it."

He said, "It pays to be careful." Then he said, "I've been reading some poetry lately." This was actually true. He went to the library most days. There was usually no one in the poetry section, so he could sit there till the place closed trying to imagine what to do with himself now that the world lay all before him, so to speak. A kindly old librarian noticed him, always with a book open in front of him, of course. She brought him cookies on a napkin with a fraying embroidered flower on it and said, "You'll be sure to wipe your fingers," which he did, and he put the napkin on the front desk as he left. Then one time she set a copy of "Paterson" on the table in front of him, smiled to recommend it, and vanished, a little arthritically, into the stacks. He seemed to bring out the angelic in old ladies. And it was a very great book! It made it seem a profound thing to sit on a bench watching the river, the ships, the gulls, which was another way he had of killing time.



He loved that book, and out of respect for that lady did not steal it, only put it behind shelved books where no one else would find it. He said, "Have you read 'Paterson'? W. C. Williams?" An actual question, since he wanted her to have read it. "No. I've heard of it. My tastes are pretty traditional."

"You have to read it. You'll see what I mean." He said, "When I'm down by the river—that bridge seems like some huge ancient thing that has just leaped out of the earth, all mass and clay and fossils, on its way somewhere—everything seems like a metaphor, you don't need to know for what. After you read that book."

She was laughing at him, her eyes shining. "I'll get me a copy tomorrow, promise. And you have to read W. H. Auden."

"He's on my list!" It was a kind of pact! They laughed, and then they were quiet, and then he said, "I should be going, now that the rain has eased up." It hadn't. "There's never time enough, in my line of work. Thanks for the tea and the shelter, Miss—"

"Della Miles."

She offered her hand and he took it.

"And I am John Ames Boughton," a version of himself that only felt like a lie, called up by the tea and the china, and a certain exuberance at the fact that the afternoon had gone well enough. He thought of forgetting the umbrella as a pretext for stopping by again, but she handed it to him. He would have to think of another ruse before he got rid of that suit.

He knew better. He would not be leaving books on her step with notes in them, brief but very clever, that would make her think of him for a minute or two every now and then. On the one hand, if he did it would give him a pleasant thing to be thinking about, working out the little messages in his mind—for weeks, perhaps—and finding the right books to steal. On the other hand, people do that sort of thing when they imagine something might come of it. She couldn't be seen walking down the street with him without damage to her reputation, a risk a teacher can't

take. The same would not be true for him, since he hardly had a reputation, properly so called. His old compulsion to do damage as chance offered had seen to that. If anything remained to him that might be called a good name, walking down a street with her would put an end to it. He felt the warm chill of impulse, actually frightened himself a little with the thought that he could do harm so easily, so innocently, really, except in the fact that he knew how grave and final the harm would be to her. A shudder of guilt passed through him, stirring other guilt, of course. There he was on a park bench in the morning sun, among the squawk and gabble and the church bells, to his inner eye naked as Adam to his own scrutiny. Stay away from her, fool. That's simple enough.

So the next day he went to the store, or whatever it was, where he had bought the dark suit, a room with harsh window light and festoons of flypaper and tables heaped with discards, and traded it, with his hat and umbrella, for another hat and a double-breasted brown tweed suit with the impersonal smell of cigarette smoke already infused in it and a small stain on the left lapel. He changed in a back room and emerged more or less himself. It was a relief to put all his pretensions down on the counter. The trade was not to his advantage, except in the sense that he had hoped to find something cheap and a little raffish. Fair warning, he thought. And he was somehow relieved that he was no longer wearing a black suit with brown shoes. The man at the counter said, "I always have things that would fit you here. The widows bring them in." Very funny.

He would not let his mood be dampened. He bought a newspaper and a pack of cigarettes at a dark little shop crowded with pipe racks and souvenir humidors and ashtrays and cans of tobacco and cigars that smelled something like tar and licorice. Somewhere in it all was a radio blaring a baseball game. The little man at the cash register watched him intently, as if theft were a card trick and he was going to catch him at it this time. The effect of the suit, he thought, since he was pretty sure he'd never been in that particular shop before. He startled the fellow with

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a dollar bill, slipped the change in his pocket, and went out to the street. The baseball game was close, it was the eighth inning, so he leaned against the wall in the sun to listen and folded the paper to the crossword puzzle. He pushed his hat back on his head, hung a smoke from his lip, and worked the puzzle, thinking that if anyone noticed him he would seem to be playing the horses. Clothes do make the man.

He glanced up because he was thinking—six letters, the second one “d”—and there was Della. Flinch. That look in her eyes—surprise, realization, maybe rebuke. She was with another young woman. It seemed to him she paused for some part of a second, long enough that the other woman glanced at him, a little mystified at the almost nothing that had passed between them. And then they went on, arm in arm, heads together, laughing. Not at him or about him, dear Jesus.

This was misery enough to justify a drink. A binge, in fact. But for some reason he just spent most of the night lying on his bed, feeling an elemental loneliness pour into his bones, that coldness that inheres in things, left to themselves. When the heart rests from its labors, for example, that excruciating push of blood. What had happened was just what he had intended, but he had not thought it would catch him off guard like that, all in one instant, without a word to say for himself, though what that word might have been he couldn't imagine. He had done her no harm at all. One lie that was more her fault than his. No, it wasn't. She had repaid his kindness with kindness. As she would not have done if she had known who he was. What he was. When defects of character are your character, you become a what. He had noticed this. No one ever says a liar is who you are, or who you are is a thief. He was a what, absolutely. He puts on one suit of clothes, a fraud is what he is. He puts on another suit of clothes—a bum, a grifter. A draft dodger was what he was. Even that was a lie. His name was a lie, no matter who had dampened his brow with it. Also his manners and the words he used and the immutable habits of his mind. Sweet Jesus, there was no bottom to it, nothing he could say about

himself, finally. He was acquainted with despair. The thought made him laugh. He had to admit that he found it interesting, which was a mercy, and which made it something less than despair, bad as it was.

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.

Much of the time this was his favorite poem. The second line seemed to him like very truth. It was on the basis of the slight and subtle encouragements offered by despair that he had discovered a new aspiration, harmlessness, which accorded well enough with his habits if not with his disposition. Keeping his distance was a favor, a courtesy, to all those strangers who might, probably would, emerge somehow poorer for proximity to him. This was his demon, an eye for the most trifling vulnerabilities. He had been doing fairly well until he saw that umbrella. Not true. He had bought that suit to wear to his mother's funeral. His brother Teddy had found the boarding house where he had been staying and left an envelope of money and a note. This had put Jack to the bother of finding another boarding

house. Teddy seemed to have contented himself that the man at the counter was not entirely dishonest and left money with him from time to time, enough so that the man could appropriate half of it and Jack would still have something to get by on. Cash meant that Teddy had been there, had once more travelled whatever distance, in whatever weather, at intervals that were long but regular enough that Jack could have been there, sitting on the steps when that brown sedan pulled up. The embraces, the tears. Jack had thought about it, which did not mean he had considered it. In any case, there was the possibility, the likelihood, that Teddy, ever the gentleman, was making himself easy to avoid. And he persisted, leaving money on the chance that Jack was alive and got some of it, accepting the assurances the desk clerk offered him.

For two years, the clerk might not have known where Jack was or that he was alive, but he saved up half the money that Teddy left, which was notably honorable. When Jack appeared again, the clerk handed him a note from his father that said, “Your dear mother is failing. She yearns to see





"I got your e-mail, but thought I'd just come over to talk."

you," and so on, and the note from his brother that said, "I can come for you. Or you can buy a bus ticket. At least try to come home in time for the funeral, which we expect will be soon." So, the dark suit. Half an intention, fought to a draw by a dozen considerations, the chief one being that he no doubt still had something of prison about him, sullen acquiescence and the rest. They might expect him to see his mother in her coffin, maybe with his father looking on, which would confront him with the meaning of his life, which had no meaning at all but was terrible in its consequences. He had learned to seem hardened against rebuke, which would be unacceptable in the circumstances.

Terrible thoughts would get him out of bed, out into the weather, where the trees and the people were all, everything, indifferent to his sins and omissions. Why wash, why shave. He went to his bench by the bridge and dozed dreamlessly in the sun. Someone passed behind him and sat down at the other

end of the bench. It was Della. He knew it before he had even opened his eyes, and he could hardly believe his eyes when he saw her, sitting there quietly, reading a book. Worse and worse. She glanced at his face, saw whatever she saw, and went back to her book.

He said, "I want to apologize."

And she said, "No need." It had to appear that they weren't there together, so she turned a little away from him. "I was rude."

A white couple passed arm in arm, talking together in those voices people use when they seem to want to be overheard. The woman—"I'll tell you what I think!" The man—"I think I already know!" Laughter.

Then Jack said, softly, "No. Not at all."

The bells struck up that great music of clash and clangor, and, when they were done, she said, "I have to go." She put her book down on the bench, put a pen in her handbag, and walked away. He waited a minute or two, then leaned across the bench to pick it up. It was

hardly in his hand when a colored boy in a ball cap grabbed it away. "You were just going to steal that lady's book," he said, and ran after her to give it to her. He saw Della thank the boy, saw him wave off whatever she was offering him from her purse, saw her walk away without a backward glance.

He had to think this through. She had known where to look for him because he had mentioned that bridge. She had brought a book for him. He thought he could let himself believe this. So that he could knock on her door and say, "I believe this is yours, Miss Miles?" Or there was a note in it, or something circled or underlined. He wished he had seen just the title of the book. It was slender, mossy green, worn-looking. It might have been poetry, something someone had read again and again. She had come looking for him on a Sunday morning, which meant she knew now he wasn't the church-going type. It meant also that she might not be on time even for the last service at her own church. She had come a long way just to let him know that things were all right somehow, whatever "things" were, whatever "all right" could be. Since they could hardly manage a few words together. She would know he felt grief—that was what it was—at her disillusionment, since nothing less than grief would have made her come so far. To comfort him. That was what it amounted to. If there had been a note in the book that said, "You are a despicable fraud," or words to that effect, even that would mean he had not ceased to exist for her when the idea she'd had of him perished. This was simply remarkable. Then she found him dozing on a bench like any bum, rumpled and dishevelled, and she had looked at his face so calmly, which in the circumstances meant kindly, and offered her apology and left her book. It was incredible that she would feel the need to apologize, but thank God she did, because what other pretext would have brought her there. Was it a pretext? Sweet Jesus, how he loved the thought.

What should happen next? Next. This was the language of consequence, lovely to him in this particular moment, because it meant there was an actual

thread of connection between them. Knowing her in the particular way he did, he would also know how to answer her. What should he do next? This would take time, and thought, so he believed, but an answer began pressing itself on him immediately, because he had imagined something like it any number of times. He would ask her out to dinner. He had a dishwashing, floor-sweeping kind of familiarity with certain establishments, where mainly Black people but a fair scattering of white people came for the fried chicken or the pork chops, or maybe for the piano player. Any of them might seem rambunctious to a Methodist lady. But she wouldn't mind! He knew that about her!

When he had once again collected Teddy's money and put himself in order, and the weather permitted, he went to a street near Della's house and loitered there, waiting for her to come home from school. When he saw her, he crossed the street and fell into step beside her. She only glanced at him, but she was smiling. He said, "Miss Miles, I'd like to take you out to dinner."

She laughed. "Well, there's a thought."

"Seriously. I know a place. There's always a mixed crowd. You might not go there for the food, particularly. But it could be, you know, a nice evening."

She shook her head.

He said, "I understand."

"You probably don't."

"I meant to say all right. No hard feelings."

She stopped and looked at him. "I'd meet you there. You shouldn't come here again. You'll have me on the train to Memphis, if my family gets word."

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I thought we should meet there. So I made a sort of map." He took the folded paper out of his pocket. "You see, on this side, all the streets, clearly marked. And on the other side"—he turned it over—"the place itself. From across the street." She laughed. "There are a few inaccuracies. I was mostly working from memory."

"I take it you added the angels."

"Angels, trumpets, harps. They are universal symbols of exceptional happiness. So I tossed them in. You can keep that if you like. Even if you don't accept."

She shook her head again. "How can I say no?"

"A weeknight? Not so noisy as the weekend."

"All right. Thursday."

"Eight?"

"Seven. It's a school night."

"Fine. Till then."

"Yes. Go away now. If I'm not there, there's some reason why I can't be."

"Understood." He tipped his hat and walked on. It all went as he had hoped, knowing that his hopes, in the circumstances, had to allow for a certain reluctance, some caution. He thought, very briefly, about the risk to her they were always aware of, and then he put the thought aside. No doubt he would fall down a manhole or get hit by a streetcar before Thursday, before this unimaginable evening, fate intervening for her sake.

But there he was, Thursday evening, loitering a few doors away from the restaurant, watching the street. And then there she was, and wearing quite a pretty hat, considering that she was a Methodist and a schoolteacher, and very uneasy about drawing attention to herself.

He said, "Miss Miles," and she stopped and smiled and he opened the door for her. The waiter, a Black man, knew him, raised his eyebrows, but showed them to a table with a mock formality that was pleasant enough.

"Out on the town tonight, I guess. With a lovely lady, too. You better take



good care of this nice lady." Jack tried to remember if this man had ever seen him sober. He hadn't given this aspect of things enough thought. The waiter laughed. "Don't mind me. I'm just here to say I hope you like pork chops, because tonight that's what we've got."

"Pork chops would be excellent."

They had the place almost to themselves. They could talk in the ordinary way of conversation, at least till later, when the piano started up and the crowd

came. He had spent days in the library thinking about what he would say to her, drawing the map and the heavenly host on the flyleaf of a big travel book that had not been checked out for years, since before the war, and then only twice. The page pulled loose from its binding very cleanly. Whenever his father had found one of his drawings, he'd say, "He's the clever one. He's going to surprise us all one day." He heard his mother say once, "I guess you're never going to give up on him." His father seemed to consider, and then he said, "I'm just not sure there would be any point in it." But the angels went well—they were fat and buoyant, cumulous. Della had to like them, he thought. And she did. Cleverness has a special piquancy when it blooms out of the fraying sleeve of failure. That was his experience, the magic trick he could usually play when he had to.

And here she was. He said, "New tie," when he realized he was smoothing it.

She smiled and said, "New hat."

He was in love with her. That did it. That hat brought out glints of rose in the warm dark of her skin. Women know that kind of thing. She, Della, wanted him, Jack, to see that particular loveliness in her. These thoughts interfered considerably with the efforts at conversation he should have been making.

She said, "That bridge you talk about really is handsome. Those huge stones. The walls of Troy must have looked like that."

"Yes. Herod's temple." Then he said, "Have you ever been to Bellefontaine?"

"The white cemetery? Why, no. I haven't had much occasion."

Of course. What a stupid question. He said, "I only ask because there is a tree there, a really huge old tree. I've probably walked by it a hundred times without noticing anything about it. But one time I happened to look back, and I saw blossoms all over it. Seriously. Big sort of golden-colored blossoms, each one upright, like it was floating on something. And I thought that was an amazing thing. The leaves hide them. But, from a certain distance, there they are. I thought that was interesting." He didn't think it was even slightly interesting now, listening to himself tell her

about it, although at the time it had seemed startlingly wonderful, one of those self-erasing, soul-freeing moments when you might actually say, “I get the joke!” He had felt the lack of someone to describe it to. This quiet, smiling woman had had that place in his thoughts for weeks. And now he was reminded that the places he went and the things he saw, few as they were, were nothing he had in common with her. That musty, unvisited corner of the library, where he practically lived, was a place he had imagined telling her about. And now he realized that it would be unkind to mention it—the refuge of his poverty and his idleness and whatever else it was about him that brought him to skulk among forgotten books, hoping that old lady had remembered him when she was packing her lunch. Dear Jesus, what a life! And this lovely woman, whose hat was no doubt actually new, wouldn’t have the privilege of reading through all that pathos and pomposity and finding a line here and there worth reading to someone—she having been that someone in his thoughts for what seemed like forever.

She was looking at him calmly, kindly. She said, “It’s probably a tulip tree. That’s really what they’re called. They’re native to North America.” She laughed. “When I was a girl, one of my brothers gave me a book about trees. I knew everything about all of them for a while. Then he gave me a book about dogs.”

“I have a brother. Actually, I have three brothers. But Teddy—he’s a little younger than I am. We were close, I suppose. He’s a doctor now.”

“How often do you see him?”

“Never.” Flinch. “Very seldom. It seems like never.” If he wasn’t careful, he might tell her the truth sometime.

She read his face, and then she said, “I’ve always heard that Bellefontaine is beautiful.”

“If you like that sort of thing.” The waiter put plates down in front of them. Pork chops, a mound of potatoes cratered with the back of a spoon and filled with that oddly speciesless gravy. There are probably ten laws in Leviticus that forbid that gravy. He said, “There are some pretty amazing monuments in there, and whole little neighborhoods

of Greek temples, probably accurate in every detail, I suppose. About the size of woodsheds. There is one that has a statue of the woman it belongs to lying there under a canopy. All marble, very elegant. The inscription on it says, ‘She died for beauty.’”

“Really! How did she manage that?”

“Arsenic. A gardener told me. She took little dabs of it to make her skin very white, and once she took too much.” Sweet Jesus, what a story.

Della said, “The poor dear!” There wasn’t just laughter in her eyes, he could see that. Affection, possibly.

Then he heard a voice he knew too well. There were some fellows, not always the same ones, who made a joke of shaking him down, collecting something he owed, they said, never quite enough to pay it off. He probably did owe something to somebody and was, in any case, usually too drunk to object. He glanced over his shoulder. Sure enough, two of them. Della looked at them.

He said, “Excuse me a moment, please,” and left through the kitchen, glad he knew the place. It wasn’t only the embarrassment, being taunted as a drunk and a deadbeat in front of Della, having to put his money on the table and then turn his pockets out. And having to do it sober. He would give in immediately, or he would attempt some sort of self-defense, which could only end badly, since there were two of them. In either case, the ruckus wouldn’t end until they let it, and by then the cops might have come. There would be talk, and Della might be named. Sneaky and spineless as it would have been under any other circumstances, as often as he had done it under all kinds of circumstances, he was pretty sure this time he was doing the right thing.

It was a terrible thing. She would never forgive him. He had spared her having much better reasons for hating him than he had given her. What a life.

He loitered in that doorway, watching to see them leave, or her leave. Ah, Jesus, it was taking her such a long time to give up on him. But finally he saw her, followed her to her door, and left feeling less desolate than he had expected. He had been running their conversation through his mind. Not so bad, not so bad.

It was a mild night. He loosened his

tie and folded his jacket over his arm. He took a shortcut down a side street, which he would never have done at night if he had been paying attention. And he heard that voice again, behind him. They were laughing. “Why, it’s the professor! I been wanting a word with you, son. If you could just stop there a minute. The boss tells me you owe him. He wants his money. I guess you better empty those pockets.”

Jack said, “What boss? Who’s—?”

And the other man hit him in the belly, a blow that startled him because it was so deft and mean. He almost said, “Wait, this isn’t the game!” but the man hit him again. He had to put his hand against a wall to keep from falling. He was carrying Teddy’s money, all of it he hadn’t spent on the tie and a shave. He took it out of his pocket and put it in the hand of the first man.

“This all?” the man said. “It better be.” Jack actually checked, found a few coins, and gave them to him.

The man laughed. “O.K., I guess we’re square for now.”

Then the other man hit him again, in the face this time. He must have been wearing a ring. Jack felt a cut on his cheekbone, a gouge. He couldn’t put his hand to it. Get blood on your hands and the next thing you know it’s on everything. They were walking away, the one saying to the other, “I can’t stand that guy. Something about him.”

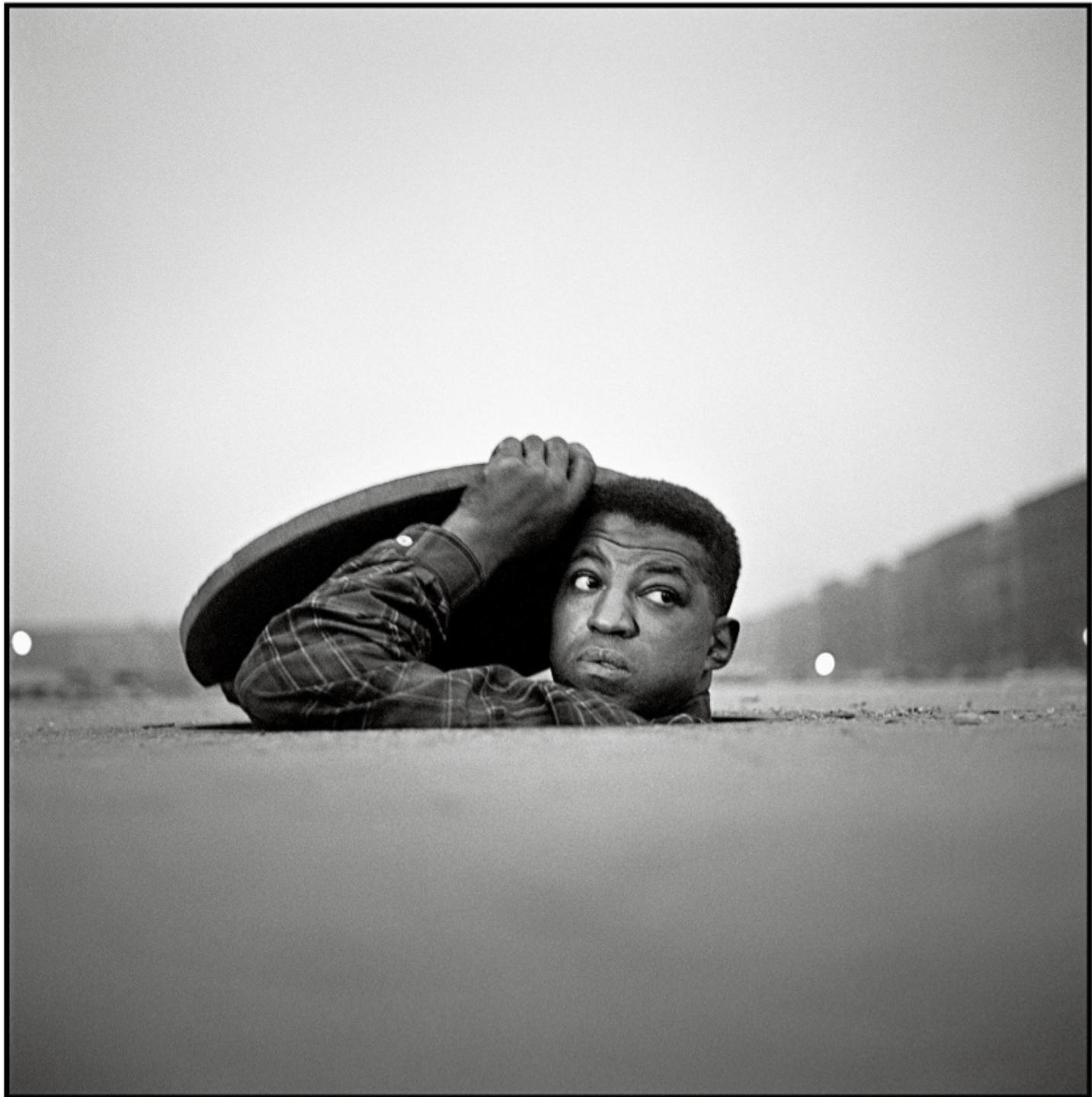
“I know what you mean,” the other one said, and threw the change on the ground and shared out the bills.

His jacket was probably all right. He laid it down on a cellar door and put his hat beside it. In the dark he couldn’t tell what was ruined already. He untucked his shirt to blot his face with his shirttail, then lay down beside his jacket and hat and waited till his breath was back and he had stopped bleeding. And the thought that came to him first, looking up at the narrow sky, was: Now I can’t go home, ever. He thought, I can’t see Della again, I can’t go to the library, I’ll have to close my lapels over my shirt the way bums do, and that was all terrible. But the way his father would sorrow over this unconcealable wound was the thought he could not bear. ♦

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THE CRITICS



BOOKS

BLACKING OUT

The world according to “Afropessimism.”

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM

The best time to read a book by Frank B. Wilderson III, it turns out, is during a hot summer of uneasy isolation, social heartbreak, and racial uprising. I read his latest, “Afropessimism” (Liveright), twice: once before the world crawled to a halt under the horror of COVID-19, and again after anger about the killing of George Floyd by police in

Minneapolis—Wilderson’s home town—erupted into a righteous spectacle of fire and glass. Since then, Wilderson’s work has received notice in unlikely places. In mid-June, the temperamentally soft and sunny conservative *Times* columnist David Brooks—who, five years ago, lamented that Ta-Nehisi Coates’s best-seller “Between the World and Me” would “trap

generations in the past and destroy the guiding star that points to a better future”—suggested that readers who wished to understand the alienation of African-Americans should read “Afropessimism,” quoting the book’s insistence that “the spectacle of Black death is essential to the mental health of the world.”

Wilderson, a professor of African-

Wilderson argues that the state of slavery, for Black people, is structural and permanent. Emancipation is a myth.

American studies at the University of California, Irvine, is one of the founders of a philosophical school called Afropessimism—a slightly misleading bit of nomenclature. Neither the body of thought associated with the term nor Wilderson's new book espouses an orientation toward the future, or gives much of a damn about social fortunes. Rather, Afropessimism sketches a structural map of human experience. On this map, Black people are integral to human society but at all times and in all places excluded from it. They are in a state of "social death," a concept that Wilderson borrows from the sociologist Orlando Patterson. For Patterson, social death describes the experience of slavery as it has appeared across time and space—a slave is not merely an exploited person but someone robbed of his or her personhood. For Wilderson, the state of slavery, for Black people, is permanent: every Black person is always a slave and, therefore, a perpetual corpse, buried beneath the world and stinking it up. "Blackness is coterminous with slaveness," Wilderson writes. And civil society as we know it requires this category of nonperson to exist. Emancipation is a myth. (Patterson, for his part, does not think that African-Americans are currently "in a situation of social death," and has called his influence on Afropessimism "ironic.")

Wilderson contends that "the narrative arc of the slave who is *Black* (unlike Orlando Patterson's generic Slave, who may be of any race) is *not an arc at all*, but a flat line." This principle poses a challenge for the book, which is largely a work of memoir. Wilderson's solution is to give us life as a series of cutouts. His memories are like scraps fished out of the shredder and reassembled into the shape of a monster; just to figure out the order of the events relayed in the book is a task. He was born in 1956 and spent the early part of his life shuttling among college towns. His parents were middle-class intellectuals, and his father's faculty positions at various well-regarded universities made Frank's childhood not unlike that of an Army brat. The Wildersons lived in Ann Arbor, Berkeley, Seattle, Detroit, and Chicago, but they stayed in Minneapolis long enough to call it home. They lived in upscale Kenwood; the mansion of the local hero and future Vice-President

Walter Mondale was nearby. (Wilderson recalls Mondale's effort to recruit his father to run for Congress.) Like many of the kids in Kenwood, Wilderson played football and idolized movie stars. Unlike nearly all of them, Wilderson was Black. The toll of that awkward fact accumulated subtly. The mother of a friend asked him, during a playdate, how it felt to be a Negro.

Wilderson doesn't say much about his schooling, but he did well enough to earn admission to Dartmouth—where he was eventually suspended, for two years, after protesting in support of some white laborers on campus. By this time, he has become the kind of post-civil-rights-era young man who quotes from *Ramparts* and earns an F.B.I. file before his senior year in college. (The file, now declassified, "is riddled with redactions like sprigs of buckshot etched on the flank of a deer," Wilderson writes.) Back in Minneapolis, he begins dating a woman named Stella, who is almost twenty years his senior and is raising a young daughter. She teaches Frank how to listen to Miles Davis and listens to him read bits of the novel he's writing. She's an activist, too, and has filed a lawsuit against a Great Society-era anti-poverty program, accusing its administrators of embezzlement, among other crimes. (A note on the copyright page explains that "names and other potentially identifying characteristics of some people in this book have been changed," and this seems to be the case with many of those involved in these events.) Stella also has a falling out with a white neighbor named Josephine, and soon she and Frank begin to experience burning sensations whenever they're in Stella's apartment: their joints hurt, their armpits and private parts start to smart. They conclude that they're being poisoned—perhaps Josephine has procured radioactive material from the university lab where she works. They flee the apartment, and sleep, when necessary, in the car Frank has stolen from his parents.

What ensues is part "Bonnie and Clyde," part "Waiting for Godot," and part "The Pilgrim's Progress." Either because of Stella's lawsuit or because of the government suspicion that Wilderson himself has provoked, they find themselves on the run from shadowy figures they assume to be with the F.B.I. On

the road, they are followed, and occasionally chased, by anonymous white men, and Wilderson breaks his account of these chases into shardlike mini-chapters. The couple visit a succession of Stella's old friends, hoping for shelter and some time to think. Wilderson implies that these acquaintances are scared to get involved in such a dangerous matter, though it seems equally plausible that nobody believes the couple. (My own intermittent trouble swallowing the story made me feel like a race traitor more than once.) One of these friends, a former member of the Weather Underground who has withdrawn into the life of a respectable middle-class white person, treats the two like a pair of ghosts.

In the end, nobody dies, and nobody's arrested. Wilderson winds up back at Dartmouth; soon, without any closure, Stella falls out of the book entirely. "This is a story I've never told before," Wilderson writes—not even to his current wife, he adds. You can't blame him.

It's possible to regard Wilderson's manner of spinning toward and away from the particulars of a story without ever fully *telling* the thing as a critique of the Black autobiographical tradition—which, in America, begins with the slave narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass and includes Richard Wright's "Black Boy" and the autobiographies of Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur. Common to the genre, even in its most radical iterations, is a narrative thrust that accentuates the forward movement of the writer. ("Narratives of ascent," the literary theorist Robert B. Stepto called them.) Douglass learns to read and escapes slavery; Malcolm finds God and Elijah Muhammad; Davis, wanted by the government, goes on the run and gets put in prison but ends up free. Even if progress isn't the message, it insinuates itself into the rhythm of this kind of book and becomes a quiet component of its logic. Wilderson obliterates that logic. What happened to him yesterday is what will happen to him today, only more loudly. Nothing has really changed: Black people still occupy the position of slaves, and what matters in the story of Frank and Stella is the nature of the forces arrayed against them, not how and whether they get away. (No one gets away.)

After Dartmouth and a surprising stretch as a stockbroker in Minneapolis—an experience that goes mostly undescribed in “Afropessimism” but which Wilderson has elsewhere characterized as a kind of double life—Wilderson enrolls in the creative-writing program at Columbia. At night, he attends classes at the New School, where stream of consciousness is in vogue. That downtown influence still shows: Wilderson skids from one glint of perception to the next without much regard for grounding details or fluid transitions; in the middle of an anecdote, he tosses you down a chute and you find yourself stumbling through a thick tangle of theoretical jargon. He thinks vertically, in terms of hierarchies and structures; the horizontal time line is beside the point. He writes from history’s humid basement, or from its even less accessible underground bunker, and the plants that bloom in his writing are less floral than fungal—his arguments and remembrances grow in tight groups, close to the ground and propped atop rotting anecdotal logs, all of them adding to the shroomy funk of the room.

Though “Afropessimism” may veer from the Black autobiographical tradition, the book doesn’t escape genre altogether. It falls into a category sometimes called “auto-theory,” an attempt to arrive at a philosophy by way of the self. The most pertinent example is “Black Skin, White Masks,” by the French-Martinican psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon, who worked up his theory of “epidermalization”—the process by which the societal inferiority of Black people is grafted onto the skin—by recounting his own experiences, along with a series of psychiatric case studies. Wilderson takes from Fanon—and then exaggerates, literally to death—a critique of humanism as it has been practiced (or, more often, not practiced) in the Western world. “Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe,” Fanon wrote. And yet, for Fanon, the process of decolonization—by way of inevitably bloody revolution—was also a process of humanization. “Decolonization,” he wrote, in “The Wretched of

the Earth,” “is the veritable creation of new men.”

For Wilderson, Fanon’s cup is too full. Other previously colonized peoples are indeed human, but not Black people. One of the bleakest aspects of Afropessimist thought is its denial that there is any meaningful analogy between Blacks and other nonwhites. When Frank and Stella try to explain their poison-induced injuries to a Chinese-American doctor, she turns them away, and Wilderson muses that “Dr. Zhou is as much a master as Edwin and Mary Epps, the antagonists in *12 Years a Slave*.” In Wilderson’s view, “people of color”—a term he uses for those who are neither white nor Black—are “junior partners” to whites in the enslavement of Blacks. One of the memories that recur in “Afropessimism” involves a Palestinian friend named Sameer, who, detailing life under Israeli occupation, describes the “shameful and humiliating way the soldiers run their hands up and down your body,” then admits that “the shame and humiliation runs even deeper if the Israeli soldier is an Ethiopian Jew.” This expression of anti-Black racism from a Palestinian is a cataclysm for Wilderson. Now he understands that, “in the collective unconscious, Palestinian insurgents have more in common with the Israeli state and civil society than they do with Black people.”

In the same vein, Wilderson describes a meeting that his father attended, as an emissary of the University of Minnesota, with several Native American leaders, hoping to resolve a conflict about reservation lands. Young Frank was in the audience, and someone sitting near him cried out, “We don’t want you, a *nigger man*, telling us what to do!” The lesson that Wilderson takes from the episode is that the Native Americans—raped and slaughtered on these lands, subjected to a genocide that enabled the Americas as we know them to exist—are “sovereigns,” and therefore human, while his dad, middle class, American, and Black, is not. In a previous book, “Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms,” which grew out of his dis-

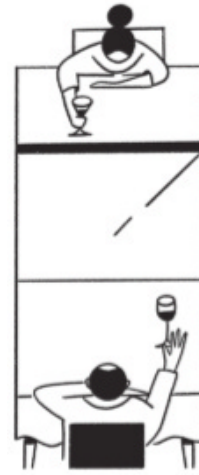
sertation, Wilderson describes “the Red, Indigenous, or ‘Savage’ position” as existing “liminally as half-death and half-life between the Slave (Black) and the Human (White, or non-Black).” In “Afropessimism,” even that gradation is gone. Wilderson overwrites history with the darkest, most permanent marker.

Every society has a murderous hierarchy: someone’s always knocking at the basement door, trying to get free.

But life is prismatic—it’s possible to be Black and degraded in America while also profiting from wanton extraction of resources overseas, oppressing millions of non-Black others, and living on land stolen from indigenous people. We are always joined in our sufferings, often by somebody we can’t see through the darkness. We

speak of solidarity precisely because the empathetic act of analogy is a way of acknowledging this complexity, and of training our ethical senses, again and again, to widen the circle of our concern. Any system of thought that has refined itself beyond the ability to imagine kinship with the stranded Guatemalan kid detained at the U.S. border, or with the functionally enslaved Uyghur in China, or, again—I can’t get over it—with the Native American on whose stolen ancestral ground you live and do your business, is lost in its own fog.

Black thought at its best has been a vehicle for and a product of analogy. Black Christians saw the liberatory potential in the story of the Hebrews rescued by God from beneath Pharaoh’s thumb and, still more, in the life of the Jewish Palestinian preacher Jesus, put to death by the colonizers of his homeland. Some of them looked to Latin America, where liberation theology blossomed; they created Black liberation theology, and forever transformed the flavor of American religion. A feeling of kinship with the colonized people of India, and with Gandhi in particular, helped make nonviolence a core practice of the civil-rights movement. A study of the revolutionary struggles in Algeria, Fanon’s great subject, helped to make the case—argued most famously by the Black Liberation Army, an influence on Wilderson—for the



occasional necessity of violence. None of this is incidental: the impulse toward freedom is always seeking friends.

While he was studying at Columbia, Wilderson was in a long-distance relationship with a woman he had met on a trip to South Africa. After completing his M.F.A., he moved to Johannesburg. It was the early nineties, the end of the apartheid era. He became involved with the African National Congress, Nelson Mandela's party. He participated in political education and worked for a time as what sounds like a minor spy; eventually, he became an elected official in the A.N.C. Later, he broke with Mandela, siding with the party's more radical members. These adventures are the subject of his first book, "Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid." The South African section of "Afropessimism" mostly concerns Wilderson's brief employment as a waiter at an Italian restaurant.

He takes the job after getting fired from a teaching gig, essentially because of his political commitments. The restaurant, Mario's, is owned by a white immigrant, and Wilderson works there alongside several Black Africans: an older waiter who tries to school him in the intricacies of racial manners under apartheid; two cooks who, he learns too late, are supporters of the reactionary party that opposes the A.N.C.; and a young woman named Doreen, who is casually harassed by the owner and eventually framed for theft by his wife, Riana. Everybody tiptoes around the whites except for Wilderson, who, by his telling, is a charismatic, bombastic presence. He meets, flatters, and befriends the Nobel-winning novelist Nadine Gordimer, a regular at the restaurant. He goads his Black peers into taking ever more brazen liberties with the whites. Why should they sit in the kitchen eating porridge during their breaks when the whites are out in the dining room, feasting on Italian? Owing to his obvious erudition and, above all, his Americanness, he's invited to join the whites one night. He drags the other Blacks along with him, largely against their will. He chows down while everyone else falls silent. Of course, he understands the situation. He sort of glories in it.

When Riana tries to frame Doreen,

as a pretext for firing her, Wilderson confronts Mario, and the two men fight. Mario fires Wilderson, but he doesn't accept the dismissal. "Wait till your regulars, like Nadine Gordimer, read this," he says. "Did you know she's a member of the ANC?" Mario and Riana are white, but, being immigrants, they are puzzling through precarities of their own, and surely some of the reason that Wilderson's confrontation with Mario doesn't turn into a lynching scene is Mario's fear of reprisal from the American government. But, in Wilderson's reading of the incident, Mario's restaurant is a plantation, and all the Black people who work there are, in equal measure, slaves. He insists that his differences from the Black South Africans are "important" but not "essential," and seems not to notice, or to care, that he is treated as a kind of "junior partner" to Mario and Riana. Among other things, Wilderson's book is the story of an American who thinks of his Blackness as normative, and, therefore, as characteristic of Blackness around the world. (This mistake is familiar to me; I make it all the time.) Careful not to extend too much imaginative empathy to Palestinians, Chinese-Americans, white women, and sundry others, Wilderson is nonetheless quick to claim sameness with—impose analogy upon—a group of Black South Africans. He's down on internationalism (a "talisman" that he has had to learn to "let go of"), but only to a point. Blackness, that fixity, that hole, is everywhere and always the same.

In the essay "Theory as Liberatory Practice," the writer bell hooks offers an account of her initial attraction to theory. It had nothing to do with cherished books or favorite teachers—nothing to do with education, as we think of it, at all. She'd had a sad childhood. "I came to theory because I was hurting," she wrote. "I found a place where I could imagine possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently." Wilderson's philosophical framework is impersonal; Blackness, for him, is a structural position. But "Afropessimism" is also, in its way, a chronicle of personal pain. The book opens after Columbia, after South Africa, when Wilderson is a "middle-aged graduate student," experiencing what he refers to as a psychotic episode. He's staring into the mir-

ror in his apartment, feeling "as though my shirt were made of insects." He starts to drool, and, fearing that his white neighbors will hurt him if he cries out for help, makes his own way to the hospital. It's a jarring, dramatic curtain-raiser, and it gives the rest of the book the feeling of a flashback—all these events are the prelude to a breakdown.

But, unlike hooks, Wilderson does not choose to imagine possible futures. The only way to cure the condition of slavery that ails Black people, he says, is "the end of the world." There will have to be a total end to things—an apocalypse. From civilization's ashes something truly new might finally grow. How to hasten this final reckoning? Wilderson doesn't say. To offer some further prescription would be a betrayal of the style of his book, and of the shape of his ideas.

For all the word's problematic history, I like "Black" as a shorthand for African-descended people everywhere precisely because of its indefiniteness, its fluidity, its fealty to no nation. It is as fleeting and symbolically rich as the color image it brings to mind, and is always flirting with and escaping strict classification. It brings me joy. It tends, on its best days, to grow. The cultural theorist Stuart Hall, in his posthumous memoir, "Familiar Stranger," writes of the colonial Jamaica of his youth, in which middle-class "colored" families like his—their brownish skin the product of congress between white colonial planters and the descendants of African slaves—would never think to call themselves Black. That word was reserved as a slur for the darker-skinned, lower-class masses, against whom people like Hall's mother defined themselves. (In the wildly mixed society of antebellum New Orleans, some "colored" Creoles—people who today would undoubtedly be considered Black—were not only free but owned darker-skinned slaves.) Only when Hall moved to England to study, and started to meet other African-descended people—first from other West Indian islands, eventually from points all over the world—did he understand Blackness as a wide-ranging political category, always unfixed but centered on justice for all, including the colonized Third World peoples of Asia and Latin America, who were their siblings in struggle.

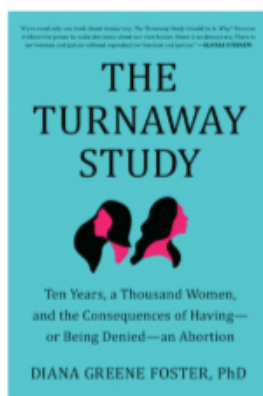
Something similar is happening right

now among people of Latino heritage. Many of the Dominican kids I knew when I was growing up in Washington Heights had skin as dark and hair as kinky as mine. None of them would ever have called themselves Black. (Some of their parents made it a point, they told me, to periodically remind them that they weren't.) Today, an increasing acceptance of, and pride in, African heritage among young Puerto Ricans and Dominicans means that many of these people celebrate their "Afro-Latinidad." By Wilderson's lights, were these people humans before this change of mind, but slaves now? Were they always socially dead, but pitifully unaware? Does Blackness have simply to do with ancestry, with which box a person ticks off on the census, or with how that person is seen by the police and understood by the state? My preference, in any case, is just to say, "Welcome home."

The most radiant American example of an always gathering, instinctively expansive conception of Blackness comes from the Black radical feminist tradition. One of its most famous documents, the Combahee River Collective Statement, is frank about the woeful position of Black women in society, and about how poorly they have been treated by others—including Black men—who should be their allies. "We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us," the statement says. Still, the collective was steadfast in its commitment to solidarity, and asserted that the "position" of Black lesbians—oppressed by dint of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation—would help their struggle against capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and homophobia, and would help bring about the freedom of the entire world. "We might use our position at the bottom," the statement says, "to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression." That's an end of days I'd like to see. It will require, I think, a conviction that our lives, however devalued, have many facets, and that we are all intimately related, and that one sufficiently emancipatory gesture might scoop us all up. ♦



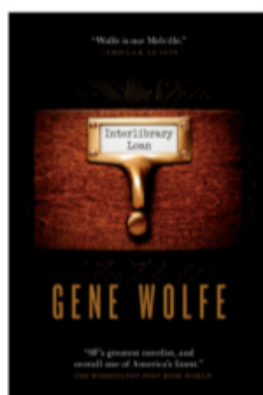
Stranger in the Shogun's City, by Amy Stanley (Scribner). This history of nineteenth-century Japan follows Tsuneno, the daughter of a village priest, who learns that "to be a woman is to grow up and leave for another household." But, after three failed marriages, she departs for the great city of Edo (present-day Tokyo). Tsuneno's rebellious trajectory, preserved in her family's archive, was unusual, yet even her most commonplace steps are absorbing. Although her squabbles and triumphs (a dispute about a kimono, a new job as maid of all work to a samurai family) can only be glimpsed, Stanley's careful speculation fills the lacunae, evoking Edo's back alleys and law courts, its fashion and food. Tsuneno, with her world in flux—the shogun will soon fall—becomes just one person in the teeming city.



The Turnaway Study, by Diana Greene Foster (Scribner). The author led a ten-year study of a thousand women, comparing those who received abortions shortly before reaching a state's gestational limit with those who did not—because they didn't learn early enough that they were pregnant, couldn't travel to a provider, or couldn't afford the escalating costs of a later abortion. Drawing on her research and on first-person narratives, the book illustrates how women denied abortions were more likely to struggle financially, suffer domestic violence, and experience short-term anxiety, while women who obtained abortions tended to experience better physical and mental health. One woman, reflecting on an abortion that enabled her to focus on her teen-age daughter and find a job, says, "It's an ordinary life, but it's an extravagant, wonderful ordinary life."



Hamnet, by Maggie O'Farrell (Knopf). Breathing life into what little we know about Shakespeare's family, this exceptional historical novel is set in 1596, in Stratford-Upon-Avon. Hamnet, eleven years old, tries to help his plague-stricken twin sister, as their mother, Agnes, makes curative potions, and their father (referred to obliquely as "the tutor") is off in London, writing plays. O'Farrell's account of the spread of the disease is all too timely, and there is an inspired scene in which the twins, in true Shakespearean fashion, trade places. At the center is the grief-stricken Agnes, whose husband's genius requires her to bear monumental loss alone. "The place in your head," she tells him. "You have gone to that place and it is now more real to you than anywhere else."



Interlibrary Loan, by Gene Wolfe (Tor). Wolfe, a celebrated science-fiction writer who died in 2019, stretched the genre's boundaries in his rich and allusive work. His final novel is set in a future North America, where libraries loan out clones of authors. The protagonist, a "reclone" of a prolific mystery writer, is borrowed by an emotionally disturbed woman who hopes that he will help her solve the mystery of a "treasure map" she has stolen from her estranged husband. Wolfe deploys sci-fi and gothic elements—an interplanetary portal, a sentient house that builds itself—to explore the question that lies at the heart of many of his novels: What does it mean to be human and alive?

BRIEFLY NOTED

A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE LONG BLUE LINE

Inventing the police.

BY JILL LEPORE



The Chinatown Squad, a notoriously harsh police unit in San Francisco, in 1905.

To police is to maintain law and order, but the word derives from *polis*—the Greek for “city,” or “polity”—by way of *politia*, the Latin for “citizenship,” and it entered English from the Middle French *police*, which meant not constables but government. “The police,” as a civil force charged with deterring crime, came to the United States from England and is generally associated with monarchy—“keeping the king’s peace”—which makes it surprising that, in the antimonarchical United States, it got so big, so fast. The reason is, mainly, slavery.

“Abolish the police,” as a rallying cry, dates to 1988 (the year that N.W.A. recorded “Fuck tha Police”), but, long before anyone called for its abolition, someone had to invent the police: the ancient Greek polis had to become the modern police. “To be political, to live in a *polis*, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence,” Hannah Arendt wrote in “The Human Condi-

tion.” In the polis, men argued and debated, as equals, under a rule of law. Outside the polis, in households, men dominated women, children, servants, and slaves, under a rule of force. This division of government sailed down the river of time like a raft, getting battered, but also bigger, collecting sticks and mud. Kings asserted a rule of force over their subjects on the idea that their kingdom was their household. In 1769, William Blackstone, in his “Commentaries on the Laws of England,” argued that the king, as “pater-familias of the nation,” directs “the public police,” exercising the means by which “the individuals of the state, like members of a well-governed family, are bound to conform their general behavior to the rules of propriety, good neighbourhood, and good manners; and to be decent, industrious, and inoffensive in their respective stations.” The police are the king’s men.

History begins with etymology, but it doesn’t end there. The polis is not the police. The American Revolution top-

pled the power of the king over his people—in America, “the law is king,” Thomas Paine wrote—but not the power of a man over his family. The power of the police has its origins in that kind of power. Under the rule of law, people are equals; under the rule of police, as the legal theorist Markus Dubber has written, we are not. We are more like the women, children, servants, and slaves in a household in ancient Greece, the people who were not allowed to be a part of the polis. But for centuries, through struggles for independence, emancipation, enfranchisement, and equal rights, we’ve been fighting to enter the polis. One way to think about “Abolish the police,” then, is as an argument that, now that all of us have finally clawed our way into the polis, the police are obsolete.

But are they? The crisis in policing is the culmination of a thousand other failures—failures of education, social services, public health, gun regulation, criminal justice, and economic development. Police have a lot in common with firefighters, E.M.T.s, and paramedics: they’re there to help, often at great sacrifice, and by placing themselves in harm’s way. To say that this doesn’t always work out, however, does not begin to cover the size of the problem. The killing of George Floyd, in Minneapolis, cannot be wished away as an outlier. In each of the past five years, police in the United States have killed roughly a thousand people. (During each of those same years, about a hundred police officers were killed in the line of duty.) One study suggests that two-thirds of Americans between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four who were treated in emergency rooms suffered from injuries inflicted by police and security guards, about as many people as the number of pedestrians injured by motor vehicles. Urban police forces are nearly always whiter than the communities they patrol. The victims of police brutality are disproportionately Black teen-age boys: children. To say that many good and admirable people are police officers, dedicated and brave public servants, which is, of course, true, is to fail to address both the nature and the scale of the crisis and the legacy of centuries of racial injustice. The best people, with the best of intentions, doing their ut-

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most, cannot fix this system from within.

There are nearly seven hundred thousand police officers in the United States, about two for every thousand people, a rate that is lower than the European average. The difference is guns. Police in Finland fired six bullets in all of 2013; in an encounter on a single day in the year 2015, in Pasco, Washington, three policemen fired seventeen bullets when they shot and killed an unarmed thirty-five-year-old orchard worker from Mexico. Five years ago, when the *Guardian* counted police killings, it reported that, “in the first 24 days of 2015, police in the US fatally shot more people than police did in England and Wales, combined, over the past 24 years.” American police are armed to the teeth, with more than seven billion dollars’ worth of surplus military equipment off-loaded by the Pentagon to eight thousand law-enforcement agencies since 1997. At the same time, they face the most heavily armed civilian population in the world: one in three Americans owns a gun, typically more than one. Gun violence undermines civilian life and debases everyone. A study found that, given the ravages of stress, white male police officers in Buffalo have a life expectancy twenty-two years shorter than that of the average American male. The debate about policing also has to do with all the money that’s spent paying heavily armed agents of the state to do things that they aren’t trained to do and that other institutions would do better. History haunts this debate like a bullet-riddled ghost.

That history begins in England, in the thirteenth century, when maintaining the king’s peace became the duty of an officer of the court called a constable, aided by his watchmen: every male adult could be called on to take a turn walking a ward at night and, if trouble came, to raise a hue and cry. This practice lasted for centuries. (A version endures: George Zimmerman, when he shot and killed Trayvon Martin, in 2012, was serving on his neighborhood watch.) The watch didn’t work especially well in England—“The average constable is an ignoramus who knows little or nothing of the law,” Blackstone wrote—and it didn’t work especially well in England’s colonies. Rich men paid poor men to take their turns on the watch, which

meant that most watchmen were either very elderly or very poor, and very exhausted from working all day. Boston established a watch in 1631. New York tried paying watchmen in 1658. In Philadelphia, in 1705, the governor expressed the view that the militia could make the city safer than the watch, but militias weren’t supposed to police the king’s subjects; they were supposed to serve the common defense—waging wars against the French, fighting Native peoples who were trying to hold on to their lands, or suppressing slave rebellions.

The government of slavery was not a rule of law. It was a rule of police. In 1661, the English colony of Barbados passed its first slave law; revised in 1688, it decreed that “Negroes and other Slaves” were “wholly unqualified to be governed by the Laws . . . of our Nations,” and devised, instead, a special set of rules “for the good Regulating and Ordering of them.” Virginia adopted similar measures, known as slave codes, in 1680:

It shall not be lawfull for any negroe or other slave to carry or arme himselfe with any club, staffe, gunn, sword or any other weapon of defence or offence, nor to goe or depart from of his masters ground without a certificate from his master, mistris or overseer, and such permission not to be granted but upon perticuler and necessary occasions; and every negroe or slave soe offending not haveing a certificate as aforesaid shalbe sent to the next constable, who is hereby enjoyned and required to give the said negroe twenty lashes on his bare back well layd on, and soe sent home to his said master, mistris or overseer . . . that if any negroe or other slave shall absent himself from his masters service and lye hid and lurking in obscure places, comitting injuries to the inhabitants, and shall resist any person or persons that shalby any lawfull authority be employed to apprehend and take the said negroe, that then in case of such resistance, it shalbe lawfull for such person or persons to kill the said negroe or slave soe lying out and resisting.

In eighteenth-century New York, a person held as a slave could not gather in a group of more than three; could not ride a horse; could not hold a funeral at night; could not be out an hour after sunset without a lantern; and could not sell “Indian corn, peaches, or any other fruit” in any street or market in the city. Stop and frisk, stop and whip, shoot to kill.

Then there were the slave patrols. Armed Spanish bands called *hermandades* had hunted runaways in Cuba beginning in the fifteen-thirties, a practice

that was adopted by the English in Barbados a century later. It had a lot in common with England’s posse comitatus, a band of stout men that a county sheriff could summon to chase down an escaped criminal. South Carolina, founded by slaveowners from Barbados, authorized its first slave patrol in 1702; Virginia followed in 1726, North Carolina in 1753. Slave patrols married the watch to the militia: serving on patrol was required of all able-bodied men (often, the patrol was mustered from the militia), and patrollers used the hue and cry to call for anyone within hearing distance to join the chase. Neither the watch nor the militia nor the patrols were “police,” who were French, and considered despotic. In North America, the French city of New Orleans was distinctive in having *la police*: armed City Guards, who wore military-style uniforms and received wages, an urban slave patrol.

In 1779, Thomas Jefferson created a chair in “law and police” at the College of William & Mary. The meaning of the word began to change. In 1789, Jeremy Bentham, noting that “police” had recently entered the English language, in something like its modern sense, made this distinction: police keep the peace; justice punishes disorder. (“No justice, no peace!” Black Lives Matter protesters cry in the streets.) Then, in 1797, a London magistrate named Patrick Colquhoun published “A Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis.” He, too, distinguished peace kept in the streets from justice administered by the courts: police were responsible for the regulation and correction of behavior and “the PREVENTION and DETECTION OF CRIMES.”

It is often said that Britain created the police, and the United States copied it. One could argue that the reverse is true. Colquhoun spent his teens and early twenties in Colonial Virginia, had served as an agent for British cotton manufacturers, and owned shares in sugar plantations in Jamaica. He knew all about slave codes and slave patrols. But nothing came of Colquhoun’s ideas about policing until 1829, when Home Secretary Robert Peel—in the wake of a great deal of labor unrest, and after years of suppressing Catholic rebellions in Ireland, in his capacity as Irish Secretary—persuaded Parliament to establish the Metropolitan Police, a force of some three

thousand men, headed by two civilian justices (later called “commissioners”), and organized like an army, with each superintendent overseeing four inspectors, sixteen sergeants, and a hundred and sixty-five constables, who wore coats and pants of blue with black top hats, each assigned a numbered badge and a baton. Londoners came to call these men “bobbies,” for Bobby Peel.

It is also often said that modern American urban policing began in 1838, when the Massachusetts legislature authorized the hiring of police officers in Boston. This, too, ignores the role of slavery in the history of the police. In 1829, a Black abolitionist in Boston named David Walker published “An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,” calling for violent rebellion: “One good black man can put to death six white men.” Walker was found dead within the year, and Boston thereafter had a series of mob attacks against abolitionists, including an attempt to lynch William Lloyd Garrison, the publisher of *The Liberator*, in 1835. Walker’s words terrified Southern slaveowners. The governor of North Carolina wrote to his state’s senators, “I beg you will lay this matter before the police of your town and invite their prompt attention to the necessity of arresting the circulation of the book.” By “police,” he meant slave patrols: in response to Walker’s “Appeal,” North Carolina formed a statewide “patrol committee.”

New York established a police department in 1844; New Orleans and Cincinnati followed in 1852, then, later in the eighteen-fifties, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Baltimore. Population growth, the widening inequality brought about by the Industrial Revolution, and the rise in such crimes as prostitution and burglary all contributed to the emergence of urban policing. So did immigration, especially from Ireland and Germany, and the hostility to immigration: a new party, the Know-Nothings, sought to prevent immigrants from voting, holding office, and becoming citizens. In 1854, Boston disbanded its ancient watch and formally established a police department; that year, Know-Nothings swept the city’s elections.

American police differed from their English counterparts: in the U.S., police commissioners, as political appointees, fell under local control, with limited su-

pervision; and law enforcement was decentralized, resulting in a jurisdictional thicket. In 1857, in the Great Police Riot, the New York Municipal Police, run by the mayor’s office, fought on the steps of city hall with the New York Metropolitan Police, run by the state. The Metropolitans were known as the New York Mets. That year, an amateur baseball team of the same name was founded.

Also, unlike their British counterparts, American police carried guns, initially their own. In the eighteen-sixties, the Colt Firearms Company began manufacturing a compact revolver called a Pocket Police Model, long before the New York Metropolitan Police began issuing service weapons. American police carried guns because Americans carried guns, including Americans who lived in parts of the country where they hunted for food and defended their livestock from wild animals, Americans who lived in parts of the country that had no police, and Americans who lived in parts of North America that were not in the United States. Outside big cities, law-enforcement officers were scarce. In territories that weren’t yet states, there were U.S. marshals and their deputies, officers of the federal courts who could act as de-facto police, but only to enforce federal laws. If a territory became a state, its counties would elect sheriffs. Meanwhile, Americans became vigilantes, especially likely to kill indigenous peoples, and to lynch people of color. Between 1840 and the nineteen-twenties, mobs, vigilantes, and law officers, including the Texas Rang-



ers, lynched some five hundred Mexicans and Mexican-Americans and killed thousands more, not only in Texas but also in territories that became the states of California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico. A San Francisco vigilance committee established in 1851 arrested, tried, and hanged people; it boasted a membership in the thou-

sands. An L.A. vigilance committee targeted and lynched Chinese immigrants.

The U.S. Army operated as a police force, too. After the Civil War, the militia was organized into seven new departments of permanent standing armies: the Department of Dakota, the Department of the Platte, the Department of the Missouri, the Department of Texas, the Department of Arizona, the Department of California, and the Department of the Columbian. In the eighteen-seventies and eighties, the U.S. Army engaged in more than a thousand combat operations against Native peoples. In 1890, at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, following an attempt to disarm a Lakota settlement, a regiment of cavalrymen massacred hundreds of Lakota men, women, and children. Nearly a century later, in 1973, F.B.I. agents, SWAT teams, and federal troops and state marshals laid siege to Wounded Knee during a protest over police brutality and the failure to properly punish the torture and murder of an Oglala Sioux man named Raymond Yellow Thunder. They fired more than half a million rounds of ammunition and arrested more than a thousand people. Today, according to the C.D.C., Native Americans are more likely to be killed by the police than any other racial or ethnic group.

Modern American policing began in 1909, when August Vollmer became the chief of the police department in Berkeley, California. Vollmer refashioned American police into an American military. He’d served with the Eighth Army Corps in the Philippines in 1898. “For years, ever since Spanish-American War days, I’ve studied military tactics and used them to good effect in rounding up crooks,” he later explained. “After all we’re conducting a war, a war against the enemies of society.” Who were those enemies? Mobsters, bootleggers, socialist agitators, strikers, union organizers, immigrants, and Black people.

To domestic policing, Vollmer and his peers adapted the kinds of tactics and weapons that had been deployed against Native Americans in the West and against colonized peoples in other parts of the world, including Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, as the sociologist Julian Go has demonstrated. Vollmer instituted

a training model imitated all over the country, by police departments that were often led and staffed by other veterans of the United States wars of conquest and occupation. A “police captain or lieutenant should occupy exactly the same position in the public mind as that of a captain or lieutenant in the United States army,” Detroit’s commissioner of police said. (Today’s police officers are disproportionately veterans of U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, many suffering from post-traumatic stress. The Marshall Project, analyzing data from the Albuquerque police, found that officers who are veterans are more likely than their non-veteran counterparts to be involved in fatal shootings. In general, they are more likely to use force, and more likely to fire their guns.)

Vollmer-era police enforced a new kind of slave code: Jim Crow laws, which had been passed in the South beginning in the late eighteen-seventies and upheld by the Supreme Court in 1896. William G. Austin became Savannah’s chief of police in 1907. Earlier, he had earned a Medal of Honor for his service in the U.S. Cavalry at Wounded Knee; he had also fought in the Spanish-American War. By 1916, African-American churches in the city were complaining to Savannah newspapers about the “whole scale arrests of negroes because they are negroes—arrests that would not be made if they were white under similar circumstances.” African-Americans also confronted Jim Crow policing in the Northern cities to which they increasingly fled. James Robinson, Philadelphia’s chief of police beginning in 1912, had served in the Infantry during the Spanish-American War and the Philippine-American War. He based his force’s training on manuals used by the U.S. Army at Leavenworth. Go reports that, in 1911, about eleven per cent of people arrested were African-American; under Robinson, that number rose to 14.6 per cent in 1917. By the nineteen-twenties, a quarter of those arrested were African-Americans, who, at the time, represented just 7.4 per cent of the population.

Progressive Era, Vollmer-style policing criminalized Blackness, as the historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad argued in his 2010 book, “The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban



“Do you like creepily polite children of strangers?”

America.” Police patrolled Black neighborhoods and arrested Black people disproportionately; prosecutors indicted Black people disproportionately; juries found Black people guilty disproportionately; judges gave Black people disproportionately long sentences; and, then, after all this, social scientists, observing the number of Black people in jail, decided that, as a matter of biology, Black people were disproportionately inclined to criminality.

More recently, between the New Jim Crow and the criminalization of immigration and the imprisonment of immigrants in detention centers, this reality has only grown worse. “By population, by per capita incarceration rates, and by expenditures, the United States exceeds all other nations in how many of its citizens, asylum seekers, and undocumented immigrants are under some form of criminal justice supervision,” Muhammad writes in a new preface to his book. “The number of African American and Latinx people in American jails and prisons today exceeds the entire populations of some African, Eastern European, and Caribbean countries.”

Policing grew harsher in the Progressive Era, and, with the emergence of state-police forces, the number of police grew, too. With the rise of the automobile, some, like California’s, began as “highway patrols.” Others, including the

state police in Nevada, Colorado, and Oregon, began as the private paramilitaries of industrialists which employed the newest American immigrants: Hungarians, Italians, and Jews. Industrialists in Pennsylvania established the Iron and Coal Police to end strikes and bust unions, including the United Mine Workers; in 1905, three years after an anthracite-coal strike, the Pennsylvania State Police started operations. “One State Policeman should be able to handle one hundred foreigners,” its new chief said.

The U.S. Border Patrol began in 1924, the year that Congress restricted immigration from southern Europe. At the insistence of Southern and Western agriculturalists, Congress exempted Mexicans from its new immigration quotas in order to allow migrant workers to enter the United States. The Border Patrol began as a relatively small outfit responsible for enforcing federal immigration law, and stopping smugglers, at all of the nation’s borders. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, it grew to a national quasi-military focussed on policing the southern border in campaigns of mass arrest and forced deportation of Mexican immigrants, aided by local police like the notoriously brutal L.A.P.D., as the historian Kelly Lytle Hernández has chronicled. What became the Chicano movement began in Southern California, with Mexican

immigrants' protests of the L.A.P.D. during the first half of the twentieth century, even as a growing film industry cranked out features about Klansmen hunting Black people, cowboys killing Indians, and police chasing Mexicans. More recently, you can find an updated version of this story in *L.A. Noire*, a video game set in 1947 and played from the perspective of a well-armed L.A.P.D. officer, who, driving along Sunset Boulevard, passes the crumbling, abandoned sets from D. W. Griffith's 1916 film "Intolerance," imagined relics of an unforgiving age.

Two kinds of police appeared on mid-century American television. The good guys solved crime on prime-time police procedurals like "Dragnet," starting in 1951, and "Adam-12," beginning in 1968 (both featured the L.A.P.D.). The bad guys shocked America's conscience on the nightly news: Arkansas state troopers barring Black students from entering Little Rock Central High School, in 1957; Birmingham police clubbing and arresting some seven hundred Black children protesting segregation, in 1963; and Alabama state troopers beating voting-rights marchers at Selma, in 1965. These two faces of policing help explain how, in the nineteen-sixties, the more people protested police brutality, the more money governments gave to police departments.

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson declared a "war on crime," and asked

Congress to pass the Law Enforcement Assistance Act, under which the federal government would supply local police with military-grade weapons, weapons that were being used in the war in Vietnam. During riots in Watts that summer, law enforcement killed thirty-one people and arrested more than four thousand; fighting the protesters, the head of the L.A.P.D. said, was "very much like fighting the Viet Cong." Preparing for a Senate vote just days after the uprising ended, the chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee said, "For some time, it has been my feeling that the task of law enforcement agencies is really not much different from military forces; namely, to deter crime before it occurs, just as our military objective is deterrence of aggression."

As Elizabeth Hinton reported in "From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America," the "frontline soldiers" in Johnson's war on crime—Vollmer-era policing all over again—spent a disproportionate amount of time patrolling Black neighborhoods and arresting Black people. Policymakers concluded from those differential arrest rates that Black people were prone to criminality, with the result that police spent even more of their time patrolling Black neighborhoods, which led to a still higher arrest rate. "If we wish to rid this country of crime, if we wish to stop hacking at its branches only, we must cut its roots

and drain its swampy breeding ground, the slum," Johnson told an audience of police policymakers in 1966. The next year, riots broke out in Newark and Detroit. "We ain't rioting agains' all you whites," one Newark man told a reporter not long before being shot dead by police. "We're riotin' agains' police brutality." In Detroit, police arrested more than seven thousand people.

Johnson's Great Society essentially ended when he asked Congress to pass the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act, which had the effect of diverting money from social programs to policing. This magazine called it "a piece of demagoguery devised out of malevolence and enacted in hysteria." James Baldwin attributed its "irresponsible ferocity" to "some pale, compelling nightmare—an overwhelming collection of private nightmares." The truth was darker, as the sociologist Stuart Schrader chronicled in his 2019 book, "Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing." During the Cold War, the Office of Public Safety at the U.S.A.I.D. provided assistance to the police in at least fifty-two countries, and training to officers from nearly eighty, for the purpose of counter-insurgency—the suppression of an anticipated revolution, that collection of private nightmares; as the O.P.S. reported, it contributed "the international dimension to the Administration's War on Crime." Counter-insurgency boomeranged, and came back to the United States, as policing.

In 1968, Johnson's new crime bill established the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, within the Department of Justice, which, in the next decade and a half, disbursed federal funds to more than eighty thousand crime-control projects. Even funds intended for social projects—youth employment, for instance, along with other health, education, housing, and welfare programs—were distributed to police operations. With Richard Nixon, any elements of the Great Society that had survived the disastrous end of Johnson's Presidency were drastically cut, with an increased emphasis on policing, and prison-building. More Americans went to prison between 1965 and 1982 than between 1865 and 1964, Hinton reports. Under Ronald Reagan, still more social ser-



"You get the wine."

vices were closed, or starved of funding until they died: mental hospitals, health centers, jobs programs, early-childhood education. By 2016, eighteen states were spending more on prisons than on colleges and universities. Activists who today call for defunding the police argue that, for decades, Americans have been defunding not only social services but, in many states, public education itself. The more frayed the social fabric, the more police have been deployed to trim the dangling threads.

The blueprint for law enforcement from Nixon to Reagan came from the Harvard political scientist James Q. Wilson between 1968, in his book “Varieties of Police Behavior,” and 1982, in an essay in *The Atlantic* titled “Broken Windows.” On the one hand, Wilson believed that the police should shift from enforcing the law to maintaining order, by patrolling on foot, and doing what came to be called “community policing.” (Some of his recommendations were ignored: Wilson called for other professionals to handle what he termed the “service functions” of the police—“first aid, rescuing cats, helping ladies, and the like”—which is a reform people are asking for today.) On the other hand, Wilson called for police to arrest people for petty crimes, on the theory that they contributed to more serious crimes. Wilson’s work informed programs like Detroit’s STRESS (Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets), begun in 1971, in which Detroit police patrolled the city undercover, in disguises that included everything from a taxi-driver to a “radical college professor,” and killed so many young Black men that an organization of Black police officers demanded that the unit be disbanded. The campaign to end STRESS arguably marked the very beginnings of police abolitionism. STRESS defended its methods. “We just don’t walk up and shoot somebody,” one commander said. “We ask him to stop. If he doesn’t, we shoot.”

For decades, the war on crime was bipartisan, and had substantial support from the Congressional Black Caucus. “Crime is a national-defense problem,” Joe Biden said in the Senate, in 1982. “You’re in as much jeopardy in the streets as you are from a Soviet missile.” Biden and other Democrats in the Senate introduced legislation that re-

sulted in the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984. A decade later, as chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Biden helped draft the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, whose provisions included mandatory sentencing. In May, 1991, two months after the Rodney King beating, Biden introduced the Police Officers’ Bill of Rights, which provided protections for police under investigation. The N.R.A. first endorsed a Presidential candidate, Reagan, in 1980; the Fraternal Order of Police, the nation’s largest police union, first endorsed a Presidential candidate, George H. W. Bush, in 1988. In 1996, it endorsed Bill Clinton.

Partly because of Biden’s record of championing law enforcement, the National Association of Police Organizations endorsed the Obama-Biden ticket in 2008 and 2012. In 2014, after police in Ferguson, Missouri, shot Michael Brown, the Obama Administration established a task force on policing in the twenty-first century. Its report argued that police had become warriors when what they really should be is guardians. Most of its recommendations were never implemented.

In 2016, the Fraternal Order of Police endorsed Donald Trump, saying that “our members believe he will make America safe again.” Police unions are lining up behind Trump again this year. “We will never abolish our police or our great Second Amendment,” Trump said at Mt. Rushmore, on the occasion of the Fourth of July. “We will not be intimidated by bad, evil people.”

Trump is not the king; the law is king. The police are not the king’s men; they are public servants. And, no matter how desperately Trump would like to make it so, policing really isn’t a partisan issue. Out of the stillness of the shutdown, the voices of protest have roared like summer thunder. An overwhelming majority of Americans, of both parties, support major reforms in American policing. And a whole lot of police, defying their unions, also support those reforms.

Those changes won’t address plenty of bigger crises, not least because the problem of policing can’t be solved without addressing the problem of guns. But this much is clear: the polis has changed, and the police will have to change, too. ♦

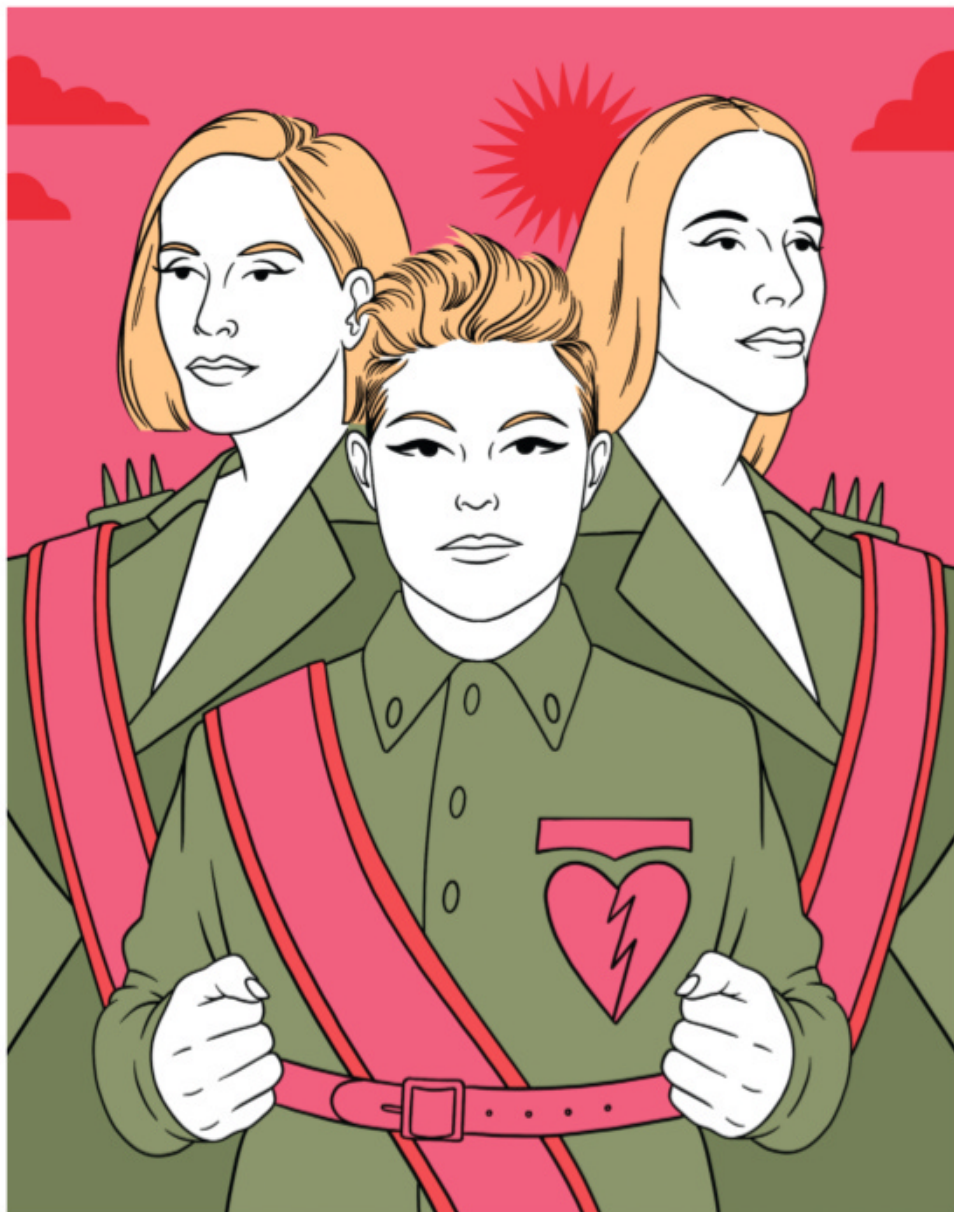
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MEETING THE MOMENT

The Chicks, reconsidered and reconsidering.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH



In late June, the Dixie Chicks dropped the word “Dixie” from its name. The band’s statement was brief and elegant: “We want to meet this moment.” The Dixie Chicks were founded in Texas, in 1989. Back then, the band was a four-piece. (The sisters Martie and Emily Erwin, now Martie Maguire and Emily Strayer, are the remaining original members; since 1995, the band has been fronted by the singer and guitarist Natalie Maines.) They wore prairie skirts and fringed blouses, and played a mixture of bluegrass and traditional country—cowgirls with chops. The band’s name was a riff on “Dixie Chicken,” a 1973 album by the chooglin’ rock band Little Feat. Sifting through early press

coverage of the group, I couldn’t find a single critic who thought the name was repugnant.

Yet, among historians, there is little ambiguity about what the word “Dixie” communicates. Its use as a doting nickname for the Confederacy was popularized by “I Wish I Was in Dixie’s Land,” a minstrel song published in 1860 and usually performed in blackface. The song is credited to Daniel Decatur Emmett, a white man from Knox County, Ohio, though the scholars Howard and Judith Sacks have suggested that Emmett stole the tune from the Snowdens, a family of freed slaves who performed and farmed around Emmett’s home town.

“Dixie songs”—which typically ex-

pressed nostalgia for the antebellum South—continued to appear throughout the first decades of the twentieth century. “They were quite popular. Irving Berlin even wrote one,” Karen L. Cox, a professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and the author of “Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture,” told me recently. She does not find the word to be merely descriptive: “As a scholar of the South, I regard ‘Dixie’ as a term that not only refers to the states of the former Confederacy but is synonymous with segregation.” Cox cited the Dixiecrats, the group formed in 1948, by Strom Thurmond and other Southern Democrats who seceded from the Democratic Party because they disagreed with its support of civil rights. “These resonances are part of what the Dixie Chicks selected when they selected the name, whether they intended to or not,” Gregory Downs, a professor of history at the University of California at Davis, said. “It’s important that they—and everyone who received that message of white Southern pride—think about what they took on.”

Within modern country music, tropes that address a kind of vigilante Southern swagger—an insistence on both the rebelliousness and the deep moral purity of the Southern states—remain wildly popular, even rooted as they are in racial violence. Yet country music itself owes an incalculable debt to the Black string bands and players—the Mississippi Sheiks, Gus Cannon, Frank Patterson, and Nathan Frazier, among others—who predated the proliferation of the phonograph. (There are several compilations of the few Black string bands that did record; two exceptional ones are “Altamont: Black Stringband Music from the Library of Congress” and “Black Banjo Songsters of North Carolina and Virginia.”) Early labels deliberately sold country and hillbilly 78s to white customers, and blues and jazz 78s (or “race records”) to Black customers, thereby enforcing a racial fissure along genre lines.

For the descendants of people subjugated under slavery, neither intention nor ignorance now feels like a reasonable defense of these tropes. Yet white history is frequently marked by a kind of inherited blindness. In “Southern Accents,”

The band formerly known as the Dixie Chicks reassesses Southern heritage.

published last year, Michael Washburn dissects how, in 1985, Tom Petty—a Floridian—used Confederate iconography to promote a concept album about the South. Washburn suggests that ideas of Southern heritage are frequently and purposefully divorced from the historical record. “We inherit, restate, sometimes re-inscribe these notions, and then represent these ideas to the world,” Washburn writes. “If we push hard enough on just about any part of our life, we plunge through the surface into a history that’s unknown to us even as it structures much of how we live.”

Is it possible to love a place and to also disclaim its history? Does the place begin to disappear when its foundational myths are challenged? Washburn jokingly describes Faulkner’s oft-quoted line about the nature of time—“The past is never dead, it’s not even past”—as “the first Southern-history meme.”

The Chicks have been at the center of controversy before. In 2003, nine days before the American invasion of Iraq, the band performed in London. As Maines introduced the single “Travelin’ Soldier,” she told the crowd that she was ashamed that the President of the United States was from Texas. When the backlash came, it was precipitate, catastrophic, and unrelenting. The Chicks had recently become the only female band in any genre to have released two consecutive diamond-certified albums, signifying sales of ten million copies or more. In our era of anemic chart numbers and fragmented attention, it’s difficult to reckon with sales of that magnitude. There was a lot to lose.

Fans piled CDs in trash cans and set them ablaze. Country radio—which was then operated in large part by the media conglomerate Clear Channel—black-listed the Chicks’ music. “These are callow, foolish women who deserve to be slapped around,” Bill O’Reilly said on Fox News. Maines received one death threat so credible that the F.B.I. recommended that the band cancel a show in Dallas. (It didn’t.)

What happened to the Chicks in 2003 can be understood now as a foretelling of so-called cancel culture, in which controversial or problematic behavior triggers mass disgust and renunciation. The Chicks endured the onslaught with rel-

ative poise. In 2005, the band started writing “Taking the Long Way,” its seventh studio album, with the producer Rick Rubin. It’s an angry, reflective record. At the 2007 Grammys, the Chicks won five awards, including Album of the Year, Record of the Year, and Song of the Year. Then the band went on hiatus.

Fourteen years later, the Chicks have a new album, “Gaslighter.” (Its release was delayed because of the coronavirus pandemic, and some physical copies of the record feature the band’s former name, in bright-yellow letters.) “Gaslighter” is brasher and more pop-oriented than anything the band has done before. Part of this shift feels germane to our era—the idea of genre, as it applies to contemporary music, is growing less and less relevant—but it also feels like a final repudiation of country music, and of a community that mostly failed to support or to understand one of its biggest acts.

Gaslighting is a kind of emotional manipulation in which a bad actor vehemently insists on the veracity of some plainly untrue claim, thereby causing the victim to doubt reality and, eventually, her own connection to it. It’s not a stretch to consider the longtime framing of the word “Dixie” (or any other paean to a South that was reliant on slaves) as a type of gaslighting. Americans have long been told that these representations of the South suggested one thing—some vague idea of regional heritage—when, in fact, they have always meant something else entirely.

In 2019, Maines divorced the actor Adrian Pasdar, and “Gaslighter,” much like “Taking the Long Way,” is a spiritual exorcism of sorts. Maines is at her best when she’s harnessing the righteousness accorded the freshly wronged, and she sings with the vigor and the specificity of a woman who has no one left to please. Perhaps this is what develops on the other side of a grievous public shaming—fearlessness in the face of collapse.

This anger and self-possession make “Gaslighter” a thrill and a delight. “Boy I know exactly what you did on my boat!” Maines sings on the title track, a seething indictment of a failed romance. “I know I’m not crazy, that’s you / Gaslighting / You’re a lie-lie-lie-liar!” The song was co-produced by Jack Antonoff, now the default collaborator for A-list

pop stars, and it’s punchy and lush, buoyed by a rich, three-part vocal harmony. Maines’s boat is the album’s Chekhovian gun, reappearing later on. “You can tell the girl who left her tights on my boat that she can have you now,” she sings on “Tights on My Boat.”

Of course, beneath every bout of unfettered rage is a badly broken heart, and Maines doesn’t always excise the ache from her voice. Her lyrics are both the heart and the point of “Gaslighter.” At times, her vocal phrasing reminds me of that of Taylor Swift, another country-gone-pop superstar who trades in frank confessions and retaliatory choruses. A line like “I hope that when you think of me, you can’t breathe,” from “Tights on My Boat,” feels especially Swiftian in its exactitude and ferocity. (The Chicks made an appearance on “Lover,” Swift’s latest record, and Maines seems to have cleared a path, or at least provided a powerful point of inspiration, for Swift’s recent political awakening.)

Elsewhere, Maines’s vitriol is less autobiographical. “Lies are truth and truth is fiction,” she sings on “March March,” a thumping, echo-laden ode to protest. In an early verse, she references the activist Emma González, a survivor of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting:

Standing with Emma and our sons and daughters
Watchin’ our youth have to solve our problems
I’ll follow them so who’s comin’ with me

The video, released in late June, features footage of protests from the past several decades. As the song’s instrumentation—banjo, slide guitar, fiddle—reaches a spare but frenzied climax, the video lists the names of people of color who were murdered by law enforcement, ending with Emmett Till.

Lately, I’ve caught myself referring to a lot of new releases as prescient—work that was written and recorded months or even years ago but feels designed to address the present moment. But good art is always prescient, because good artists are tuned into the currency and the momentum of their time. The Chicks are particularly well positioned to see what’s coming for America right now—how the past two centuries have delivered us to this exact moment, and how we should rise to receive it. ♦

THE RETURNS

"Palm Springs" and "Relic."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Not a day goes by when I don't think about "Groundhog Day," a film in which the same damn day goes by, over and over. I had a premonition, when Harold Ramis's movie was released, in 1993, that it might hang around in our bloodstream, and so it has. What matters about the story's main conceit—of a fellow named Phil

have been on the prowl. There is a tasty irony in settling down to a new movie and, after half an hour, frowning in the dark and saying to yourself, "Hang on, haven't I been here before?" No one has been dumb enough to risk a reboot of Ramis's film—wisely so, since the mere attempt would rip a hole in the space-time continuum. Instead, the axioms



In Max Barbakow's film, wedding guests find themselves caught in a time loop.

(Bill Murray), enchained in a time loop—is not its novelty, or the crystal-line logic with which it is worked through, but the fact that it answers to something permanent in our way of being. (The very best comedies, now and then, can do this with an ease that makes tragedians go nuts.) "Groundhog Day," people say, when asked about their job, or the third year of their marriage, or the prospect of infinity in a meaningless void, or the choice of salads at the lunch counter. We can fight the loop; we can cave in to it; we can take the karmic path, pour another beer, and go with the flow. Makes no difference. At bottom, all of us are Phil.

"Groundhog Day," though impeccable, is not inimitable, and copycats

of groundhogger have been applied to various genres. Hence "Edge of Tomorrow" (2014), a war movie in which Tom Cruise keeps getting killed in combat and then waking up the next morning, in flawless fettle. "Happy Death Day" (2017) ropes the slasher movie into the loop, for the benefit of those cognoscenti who like their slashings on repeat. The smartest riff is that of "Source Code" (2011), in which eight action-packed minutes, rather than twenty-four tiring hours, are frequently rerun, in a bid to foil a crime.

Now we have the boringly titled but keenly spirited "Palm Springs." The director is Max Barbakow, the screenwriter is Andy Siara, and the chronologically challenged hero is Nyles (Andy

Samberg), who, at the outset of the tale, is already stuck. Whatever he does, however he dies, whoever he sleeps with, and regardless of his good deeds or his gross misconduct, he is doomed to open his eyes, afresh, to a nice identical day in a Palm Springs hotel. And guess what? It's a *wedding* day. Nyles isn't the one getting hitched, thank heaven. He's only there because his girlfriend, the dim and faithless Misty (Meredith Hagner), is a bridesmaid. But still, what a dazzling vision of the purgatorial: a desert of vast eternity, strewn with so-so canapés, stumblebum speeches, and worse dancing. Sisyphus had it easy.

Nyles has one companion in his plight, a fellow-guest named Roy (J. K. Simmons), who is none too pleased about this accursed state, and who vents his spleen by shooting Nyles with a bow and arrows—to no lasting effect, of course. Soon, another guest, Sarah (Cristin Milioti), the sister of the bride, is unwittingly sucked into the fray. (Barbakow makes the mistake of trying to unearth the roots of the loop, offering some woo-woo baloney in a mystical cave. Ramis's craftiest coup was to leave things unexplained.) Nyles is there to verse her in the laws of perpetual recurrence. "Your best bet is just to learn how to suffer existence," he tells her, mutating briefly into Schopenhauer, but the merrier option, as he and Sarah proceed to demonstrate, is consequence-free excess: drinking, driving way too fast, stealing an airplane, and romping around a dive bar in matching denim jackets and red neckerchiefs.

So, do all these shenanigans mark an advance on Phil? Not really; he, too, veered between the nihilistic and the cavalier, and most of "Palm Springs," I'd say, was prefigured in the sight of Bill Murray slowly jamming a slice of cake into his maw, looking at a disgusted Andie MacDowell, and then mouthing, "What?" (or, to be precise, "Whahh?") through a clot of creamy frosting. Also, his ever-crumpled features told of the tedium vitae that goes with the loop, whereas Andy Samberg—immensely cheerful company onscreen, as fans of "Brooklyn Nine-Nine" will attest—prefers his groundhog neat and quick, without a chaser of hangdog.

What does make this movie stand out is the presence of Cristin Milioti, a

paragon of goofiness and grace. Though wide-eyed, she is far too knowing to be an ingénue. You may recall her in “The Wolf of Wall Street” (2013), yelling at Leonardo DiCaprio as he spills out of a limousine in front of Trump Tower, and the yells persist, in the early scenes of “Palm Springs,” with Sarah exclaiming, “What the fuck?” for want of anything wittier. She even screams underwater, in a pool. But gradually, under Milioti’s care, the character blooms, not just in resourceful roguery but in pathos; the happy haze of tears that descends upon her in the dive bar is as sudden and as heart-seizing as the closeup of Ginger Rogers, in “Shall We Dance” (1937), half crying when Fred Astaire says goodbye with a song. Falling in love is grand, but imagine falling time and time again. Nyles is a lucky guy.

If there were a campaign for the promotion of matrilineal movies—and there ought to be—then “Relic” would be in the vanguard. This forbidding Australian film, directed by Natalie Erika James, tells of three women, each of a different generation. The oldest is Edna (Robyn Nevin), who is in her eighties, and who lives alone, a fair way from Melbourne, in a secluded house. When she goes missing, her daughter Kay (Emily Mortimer) and Kay’s daughter Sam (Bella Heathcote) come looking for her. They move in, consult the police, comb the dripping forest nearby, and wait for Edna to return. Which she does, without warning; Kay finds her in the kitchen, wearing a robe and with dirty feet, and greets her with bewilderment and relief. Edna looks up.

“Tea?” she asks. “One sugar, right?”

It’s a fine moment, all the more troubling for Edna’s casual tone. “I suppose I went out,” she says, as if that settles the issue. The question of *where* she went—whether outward, into the woods, like a witch on the lam, or inward, into the secret recesses of her dwelling—remains unresolved. And you can’t help wondering how she got that smarting bruise, as dark as a damson, on her sternum: the first of many insults to the flesh, be warned, that are shown in the course of the film.

In some respects, “Relic” is a haunted-house flick of the old school. Stains migrate across walls; a window of colored glass, set in the front door, is clouded by black mold; things truly do go bump in the night. Even a humble tumble dryer gets to join in, thumping away of its own accord—a godsend, surely, when you have a bunch of laundry to get through, but I guess it adds to the spooking. On the rare occasions when lamps are switched on, they cast but a feeble glow, and I had to smother a guilty laugh when Kay was ordered, in all seriousness, to *look under the bed*. Yikes! That sort of thing has been a joke for almost a century; in the silent version of “The Cat and the Canary” (1927), an anxious guest, in a creaky mansion, kneels down to take a similar peek. There, she finds nothing worse than a simpering chump, though it’s true that his spectacles gleam, for an instant, with diabolical fire.

“Relic” is designed less to freak you out than to worry away at you. More daunting than any evil spectre, visiting from the dead, is the movie’s fear—common to countless families—that

living souls will become the ghosts of themselves, and that a person’s memory, be it fond or distressing, may start to rot like a corpse. The dreaded word “dementia” is never mentioned, but you can see it and hear it in Edna’s actions and inactions; she springs at her loved ones in a rage, scrabbles at the soil in order to bury a photograph album, and stands erect and bare, like a statue, as the bath overruns. So long is her ash-gray hair that, when unpinned, it falls halfway down her back and curtains her; we can’t even tell, at one point, which way she is facing.

It’s a hell of a performance by Robyn Nevin, who’s had a long and commanding career on the Australian stage. She was the artistic director of the Sydney Theatre Company; her production of “Hedda Gabler,” starring Cate Blanchett, travelled to BAM in 2006. I actually wanted more of Nevin in “Relic,” because she summons the creative nerve, amid the clamminess and the gloom, to venture a light touch. “House arrest it is, then,” Edna says, when she’s told to stick around where Kay and Sam can keep an eye on her. But what if she sticks *too* close? Can you peel her off? There are remarkable scenes, late on, in which the house appears to home in upon the women; the rooms grow ever smaller and more boxy, the better to reinforce the terrifying idea of old age as a kind of crawl space. By the end, I didn’t care how much of “Relic” was unfurling in the characters’ heads, and how much was taking place on the premises. I just wanted room to breathe. ♦

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Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Lonnie Millsap, must be received by Sunday, July 19th. The finalists in the June 29th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the August 3rd & 10th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

THE FINALISTS



“It’s never over easy.”
Elsa Chiao, Brooklyn, N.Y.

*“And then I find out all the king’s horses and all
the king’s men are out-of-network.”*
Gary Skidmore, White Plains, N.Y.

“No, actually I fell off the wagon.”
Sarah Landeryou, Mountain Village, Colo.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“I found something serious under the hood.”
Russell Keen, Paris, France



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